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Hart and Soul

TOP SHELF

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## PROLOGUE

One night, when Jennar was five years old, a heavily pregnant woman stumbled into the Kehani camp wearing nothing more than a few scraps of white kala deer hide. She wasn't from a tribe Jennar recognized. She was too pretty, her features too thin and delicate to be from one of the mountain tribes or even the plains tribes. The beads and feathers braided into her hair were foreign.

The hardships of her journey showed in her bloodied feet and the hunched-over way she walked. Her breaths were hoarse, her face taut with pain. As soon as she reached the circle of women huddled around the cooking fires, she collapsed, crumpling to her knees and then rolling onto her side. Jennar's mother, Lea, took charge of the newcomer and issued orders to the other tribeswomen. Lea had just gotten the new woman to lie down on her back when fluid gushed from between the pregnant woman's legs. She cried out and clutched her belly.

Curled up in blankets, Jennar watched, wide-eyed and forgotten as the women fussed. Sweat coated her skin as the tribeswomen tried to get her to stand, and kept telling her that squatting would make the birth easier, but every time she tried her legs crumpled beneath her. Finally, they let her be.

"What tribe?" Lea asked, over and over, but the woman wouldn't answer. After the first cry of pain, she made no sound, even though it looked to Jennar that she must be in a lot of pain. "Who is the father?" Again, no answer. Lea looked irritated. Jennar knew that some tribes were their friends, and others weren't, and that if the new woman wouldn't give an answer she was probably from one of the unfriendly tribes. If it was true, she'd be given only the most basic courtesies and then sent on her way as soon as she could stand.

Jennar didn't think it would be soon. The woman's harsh gasps made him cringe. Blood mixed with the dirt where she lay.

Lea and the other women crouched nearby, but did nothing to either help or interfere. With the friendly tribes, sometimes the women went from one camp to the other to live, to bring fresh blood to the tribe. Where that was looked on as a fair trade, an uninvited woman was seen as a traitor, someone untrustworthy that might bring harm to the tribe.

Jennar knew what the women thought of such things, since he'd heard them talk about it often enough, but he didn't think it was very nice to just watch as the woman struggled to give birth. He'd seen babies born before, and knew that the mothers were often in pain, but not this much. Something had gone very, very wrong.

"Feet first," Lea muttered. She reached between the woman's legs and did something Jennar

couldn't see. The sight of the blood and the woman's strained face scared him, but he couldn't look away. On the outskirts of the women's circle, a few of the men from the tribe had come to watch, curious at the noise. More men gathered as time went on. Jennar felt sick, but he still couldn't bring himself to hide his head under the blankets to muffle sight and sound of the woman.

Lea kept working. After a long time, the baby was born, shiny, and blood-covered. It wriggled feebly in the dirt, still attached to its mother's body by a blue-gray cord. A boy, Jennar saw when Lea moved the infant so she could lean over and cut the cord with her teeth. His mother's body was still. Too still, Jennar knew.

"Dead. It figures," Lea said unhappily. Jennar knew why; none of the tribe wanted the extra burden of raising a child that wasn't their own. The dead woman had no name, no tribe, no possessions except the scraps of hide, and those Lea took from the body and wrapped around the infant without bothering to clean the blood and dirt caked on its skin. *Kala* deer hides were special, a token given in love from a tribe member to their lover, but they were the only bits of love from a woman the baby was shown. With a knife, Lea cut a string of beads from the woman's hair and set them aside. "Maybe someone will come looking for her and recognize her by these. But what to do with the child?"

"Leave it," one of the other women said. "It looks sickly enough to die soon anyway."

Lea looked sorely tempted, but shook her head. "The gods would not want us to be so cruel. We'll feed and shelter it until it's of age and then send it away."

Despite Lea's proclamation, the women left the infant there on the ground while they readied the dead mother's body for burial. Jennar lifted the poor little thing and then wetted some rags and used them to clean the baby as well as he could. It was tiny, wrinkled and brown, and Jennar took his time cleaning between every finger and toe, fascinated by the tiny hands and feet. He held the infant to his chest. It cried weakly. Jennar kissed the baby on the forehead, as he'd seen women do with their babies. "It'll be all right. I'll take care of you. I promise."

He probably imagined it—his mother told him later that he did—but he could have sworn he felt *something* pass between them. Childishly, he thought it was love, because he'd decided to love the baby since no one else did. When he got older, he thought the feeling might have been a sort of magic he didn't understand. By the time he was a man, he forgot about it completely.

He forgot about the feeling just then as the shaman came to say a few words of blessing over the dead woman's body. He took a brief look at the baby, and praised Jennar for his diligence. He frowned when he saw the infant's wrapping. "This hide it wears—"

Lea jerked her head at the body. "It was hers. The only thing she had."

The shaman raised an eyebrow, but said nothing more. Jennar knew that look, and he had the feeling the old man knew a secret but wasn't going to tell anyone. Rituals done, the tribe dispersed. The men took the woman's body out into the trees, away from the Kehani dead. They

would build a cairn so it could be found if anyone came looking, but their duty ended there.

When Jennar later asked his mother about a name, she shrugged, too busy to care. Jennar thought for a long time about what to call the baby. "Niann," he said, finally, pleased at the meaning. It meant "fawn" in their own language. His mother laughed when he told her, but said nothing more. The name stuck.

At five, he wasn't rebuked for showing interest in the infant. Instead, as he learned later, the women were grateful to have their hands free. One of the women with a newborn of her own grudgingly nursed Niann until he was old enough to be weaned, and then it was Jennar that made sure the food was chewed soft enough that Niann wouldn't choke on it. He kept Niann by his side at night, hushing him when he fussed, because the women would complain if they were wakened.

Jennar helped Niann through his first steps, laughing and wiping the younger boy's dirtied knees when Niann fell. And then, when Jennar was seven, his uncle, the Chief, acted as his sponsor and took him away from both the women's fires and Niann to learn the man's ways. Guilt wracked Jennar when he heard Niann's inconsolable cries cut through the darkness. More than once, he got up to go back to the women's fires, but his uncle's hand stayed him. "Children are women's affairs. You're learning to be a man. Be strong. Leave him to the women."

Niann's wailing cut to Jennar's heart, but he learned not to let his emotions show lest he earn another rebuke from his uncle. After a few nights, the crying stopped. Jennar told himself Niann was fine, even though he didn't believe it. No one at the women's fires loved the boy.

As the months went on, Jennar learned the ways of the hunter and warrior, how to walk silently through the forest, how to seek game and to offer prayers to the spirits when the animal gave its life. His uncle taught him to embrace the duties and strengths of manhood, while Niann ran around naked, scrounging food or being ordered around. By the time Niann turned seven, no male sponsor made an offer for him. Niann stayed by the women's fires, scrubbing cooking pots and grinding stones, shelling beans and peas and doing whatever other mundane chores the women could get him to do.

To Jennar's relief, he wasn't the only one watching over Niann. The shaman, Heyka, played with the boy from time to time. Although he didn't formally sponsor Niann, Jennar saw the boy tagging along after the shaman, fetching food for him, or carrying supplies to one tent or another. Jennar felt an unaccustomed pang of jealousy as he watched the two. He still wanted to be with Niann and to be the one the younger boy looked up to. Not that the shaman wasn't worthy of adoration; Niann was lucky to be given attention by someone of the shaman's status. It was just ... he'd liked being the protector and knew how much Niann had needed someone.

Determined to do something of his own for Niann, Jennar taught himself to carve. His first animals were crude representations of what he meant them to be, but the later ones were good, and he left several for Niann to play with. They caught his uncle's eye and Jennar was immediately apprenticed to one of the hunters to learn how to craft bows and arrows. Whether he would stay with the man or not depended on the totem animal Jennar saw when he went to the

dreaming-place.

Jennar carved the animals in his spare time, and, when he could, snuck out of his own tent in the middle of the night and over to the women's fires. Niann was easy to find, since his blankets were the farthest away from the fires. He was curled up, clasping the thin blanket around his bony shoulders. Lanky black hair obscured his face. Jennar tucked a wooden bear into Niann's palm and smiled. It was all he could really do for the boy, to leave the rare gifts. Even speaking to him would draw too much attention, and, anyway, Niann seemed to have forgotten who Jennar was. Whenever their eyes met from across the camp, Niann's held curiosity and envy, but not recognition.

He crept back to his own tent, grateful that he'd learned to walk in silence. If the boy didn't remember him, so much the better. Besides, he would be a man soon, and men had other things to worry about, such as the journey to the dreaming-place to seek his totem god.

On his fourteenth birthday, he went up the mountain. When he came down, he told his first lie to those waiting for him. "Bobcat," he said when they asked him which god had visited him. A good, solid hunter, as he wanted to be. They cheered and went away to plan his ceremony.

Later that night, he left Niann his best carving yet, a running fox with an outstretched tail. He'd carefully drilled a hole between the fox's shoulders and threaded it onto a leather thong so Niann could wear it around his neck. He could have sworn this particular carving had a life of its own, that when he held it cupped in his hands it almost seemed to move. "I promised I'd look after you," Jennar said in a quiet voice as he tied the thong around the sleeping Niann's neck. "And I mean to. No matter what. When I'm able, I'll teach you everything."

He crept away, wondering what would happen to a man who'd lied about his totem animal.

## CHAPTER ONE

At seventeen, Niann knew when he wasn't wanted.

"Here," Lea said and thrust a reed basket at him. It was big, nearly too big for Niann to put his arms around. "We're out of *haka* berries. Don't come back until it's full."

Niann held his tongue despite his rage. Collecting *haka* berries was a child's task. He was too old for this. He gave one last murderous glance toward the women's fires as he stalked out of the camp. Too old to be there. Bad enough to be an outcast; worse to be the only boy past the age of six to still claim bed space in the women's circle. It wasn't fair. He could be a man just like any of the others if only they'd give him the chance.

Of course, no one would. They didn't want to waste their time on an outcast like him. Lea had already hinted about what would happen the day he came of age. He'd be asked to leave. Most days, Niann found himself longing for just that chance, until fear overtook his reason. Where would he go? Besides the tribe in the valley below them, he knew the locations of no other tribes. As much as he hated being among the Kehani, being alone would be worse.

The women and the cooking fires were in the center, while the men slept in tents by themselves or in pairs on the outside, like *kala* deer males protecting the herd. If the men felt like it, they would go and ask for companionship among one of the women for the night, but most of the time the women stayed together, cooking and gossiping. None of the men deigned to look at him as he passed through the outskirts of the camp. Niann kept his head down, but snuck a gaze to see if Jennar was around. Not today. Niann sighed in disappointment. Every once in a while he caught Jennar peeking at him when he thought Niann wasn't looking, and Niann didn't know why. Jennar had plenty of lovers, and anyway, men weren't allowed to take boys into their tents at night. It didn't keep Niann from wondering. Jennar was handsome, skilled at carving and hunting, and everything Niann wanted to be and couldn't.

The only one who seemed to care about him at all was Heyka. Niann walked by the shaman's tent on his way out of the camp. To his delight, Heyka was sitting outside, eating the noon meal of flatbread and venison. "Where are you off to?" the shaman asked. Like Niann, he wore only a leather breechclout, owing to the summer warmth. Beads clacked in his hair as he bent his head back to empty his bowl into his mouth.

Niann wrinkled his nose. "*Haka* berries. Lea sent me to fetch some. Isn't there anything I could do for you instead?"

Heyka chuckled. "If she sent you to fetch berries, you'd best get. The chief's sister is not one to cross."

No, she wasn't. Just as her brother led the tribe, Lea effectively led the women—and those unlucky enough to have to sleep among them. Niann scuffed his feet in the dirt, utterly unwilling to go on his mission.

"How old are you now? Seventeen?"

"Eighteen, in a few moons." He held his breath. Maybe soon the shaman would say it was time for him to go up the mountain, to the dreaming-place. All of the other boys and girls went when they were fourteen or fifteen, but Niann hadn't been allowed to go. Lea said it was because he was an outcast, not part of the tribe and therefore not worthy of the benefits of its members.

The shaman must have seen the hopeful expression in his face. Heyka smiled. "Not long now. I promise you that. Soon, you'll know what you are meant to do."

"Tell me," Niann pleaded. "I know you know. When can I go up the mountain? Will I ever?"

"Patience," Heyka said, and Niann groaned. It was a platitude Niann had heard far too many times. "Gather your berries, and while you're out, practice what I've taught you."

Disappointed, Niann nodded. Heyka had spent a fair amount of time teaching Niann how to walk silently in the forest and where to look for the herbs he used most. If possible, Niann would bring back plants the shaman used to please him.

"Go." Heyka gestured at the waiting forest.

Niann went, dragging the basket behind him.

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He trudged into the trees beyond the camp. The only reason Niann liked to get away was so he could practice doing the things Heyka taught him. Unthinking, he clasped the fox talisman that hung around his neck. He didn't know who, or what had brought it, or the numerous other animal carvings he'd gotten over the years, but he knew what the fox symbolized: protection by staying hidden.

Which was exactly what he was practicing. He picked his way carefully through the trees and groundcover, walking with the particular lightness that left no sign or sound of his passing. He was quiet enough to walk right by a quail and her chicks, all of them pecking for seeds beneath the dead leaves. None of them paid him any attention.

The best *haka* berry bushes grew a ways from the camp, down the skinny dirt trail leading to a creek. The bushes were on the far side, so Niann had to walk through the chilly water to reach them. When he reached the ones he was most familiar with, he groaned in disappointment. Most of the branches had been picked bare by some other tribe member, and the few berries that



remained were either too green or half-eaten by birds or insects.

Niann walked onward, deeper into the woods. Jays and magpies screeched overhead, fighting over some precious scrap of food. His steps grew careless; a startled rabbit rushed off into the undergrowth, which only made Niann angrier. If he'd been taught the ways of manhood, he would've been able to catch the rabbit and take it back to camp for the women to skin and cook. Heyka hadn't taught him how to hunt, saying only that it was unnecessary for him. Niann wouldn't starve, thanks to the shaman's lessons about edible plants, but he still resented being denied something that all the other boys learned.

Eventually the number of trees lessened, and Niann stood in a rocky clearing. There, on the far side, he found his prize, a *haka* berry bush with plenty of ripe, purple berries. It was tricky to get to; the bush had managed to grow between two large, pinkish boulders. Gods, this was going to take forever. He couldn't take the basket up there with him and still manage to keep his balance. He'd be clambering up and down the rocks all afternoon.

There wasn't a choice, though. It was either collect the berries he saw, or spend too much time searching the woods for another suitable bush. He set the basket down and climbed the boulders. He did have a good aim; perhaps he could just toss the berries into the basket and save himself the trouble of going up and down. He scrambled up the first boulder, grabbed a handful of berries, and tossed them into the basket.

Easy. Handful after handful went into the basket. A few berries went astray, but he'd pick them up as soon as he went back down. He had to be careful the more he overreached himself. The thorns on the bush were dangerous. Every child knew to be careful picking *haka* berries, because pricking yourself on the thorns could make you very, very sick.

A few more handfuls, and he was getting disappointed. Most of the ripe berries were gone, and the basket wasn't even half full. He crouched and looked through the bush's branches. There, on the back side, were another few clumps. Putting most of his weight on his left hand, Niann leaned forward over empty space in order to reach around the back of the bush.

Loose dirt made his grip slippery. He reached toward a bunch of ripe, purple berries—and slipped, falling headlong into the crevice below. Pain sheared his arm and leg as he hit the sides of the crevice before landing hard on his back.

Dirt and debris cascaded around him, and when the dust cleared, Niann's arm and ribs hurt too badly to move. His leg throbbed, and when Niann carefully turned his head to look, he saw that he must have cut his leg open on the bush's thorns when he fell. Blood pooled to make the dirt black. That, more than the pain in his arm and chest, made him worry.

The only exit he could see was high above, a thin ribbon of blue sky punctured with the thorny *haka* branches. Niann doubted he would have been able to climb out even with two good arms and legs. The sandstone walls were too smooth and too far apart to get a good grip. This must have been where a river flowed, once. There were all kinds of little canyons and gorges near the camp, though most weren't as hidden as this one. That brought another danger. If it rained

uphill from where he was, the little gorge could flood, and he would drown.

Someone would notice he was missing and come for him soon. Before nightfall. Or so he consoled himself. The sky turned pink, then gray, and Niann tried to while away the time by counting the stars he could see above him. Sleep was almost impossible. His ribs hurt with every breath, and his leg itched as if ants were crawling on it. When he got hungry, he ate the few *haka* berries that had fallen around him. The sweet, juicy taste almost made up for the bitterness of their thorns. The moon drifted overhead and lit the inside of Niann's rocky prison.

Morning came, and still no one appeared. Midday, and sunlight shone directly on Niann and made him hot and parched. That was the first time he felt afraid. The berries were long gone, and he had no water. He didn't want to die. He grasped his fox talisman and mouthed a prayer to the gods. His mouth was dry, his tongue sticky and swollen. "Please let them come. Please let someone care that I'm gone."

He opened his eyes when something blocked the sunlight. A deer. A kala deer, one of the tribe's revered animals. A male, by the curved, multi-pointed, black antlers. The white coat was speckled with brown as it shed its heavy winter coat for the spring. It peered into the ravine and gave a low, rumbling bleat.

*I have been waiting for you at the dreaming-place. Why have you not come to me?*

Niann stared at the hart, sure he must be hallucinating. The voice sounded inside his head rather than in his ears. "I can't. They won't let me. I'm an outcast."

*You are not their captive, nor are you bound by their rules. Come to me.*

"I can't!" Niann said again. Why couldn't the deer understand?

*COME!*

The urgency in its voice added another layer of fear to Niann's predicament. He wouldn't be going anywhere if no one came to look for him.

*Help will come*, the hart said, once it seemed to finally understand that Niann couldn't move, let alone go up the mountain, *and then you will find me*. The shade from the animal must have made a difference. Niann closed his eyes, and dozed, no longer quite as afraid of dying.

## CHAPTER TWO

Jennar rolled his eyes and wished Yosan wasn't in his tent right now. The other hunter had invited himself in last night and stayed, much to Jennar's dismay. Jennar looked longingly to the corner of the tent at the carving he'd started, a half-emerged figure of a kala deer. It was all rough angles and only a vague suggestion of a deer, but Jennar could see the end result in his mind's eye.

If only he wouldn't keep getting interrupted.

"Want to wrestle, Jennar?" Yosan asked. He cocked his head and smiled. The bulge in his loincloth made it obvious what he wanted in terms of "wrestling." Was there ever a day when Yosan didn't need to mate? Jennar doubted it. Yosan wasn't big, but he was heavy and strong, his chest and legs well-defined, and that, more than anything, was why Jennar put up with him. He was nice to look at.

"Please?" Yosan crawled up behind Jennar so his chest touched Jennar's bare back, and his erection nudged suggestively between Jennar's buttocks. Jennar's skin tingled. He didn't like Yosan much, but maybe ...

He jerked when Yosan's hand snaked around his waist and into the front of his loincloth to grab his cock. Yosan was rough, but the firm grip was enough to send all thoughts of carving straight out of Jennar's head. By the time Jennar thought to react, Yosan had painfully twisted Jennar's arm behind his back.

"Got you!" Yosan's voice was filled with a wry humor. "Will you, Jennar? Please? Everyone knows you're the best."

"I might, if—ow!—let me go, beast." One more playful wrench, and Yosan loosed Jennar's arm. Jennar rubbed his sore shoulder, and didn't resist as Yosan pulled off Jennar's loincloth and then his own. Yosan lay back against the furs that served Jennar for a bed, leaving Jennar's body craving the touch that had just been withdrawn. This was the game Yosan played. He liked to make his lovers earn their rewards. Not very fair, in Jennar's mind. Yosan was as single-minded and unaware of his strength as his badger totem.

Twisting around, Jennar bent over Yosan's erection. He spent a few moments tracing the blue veins with his tongue, satisfied to see Yosan shudder. "I'm not the best. You're just too impatient to try anyone else." He took as much of Yosan's sizable cock into his mouth as he could.

"Of course you're the best. The best young hunter, the best carver, why not the best lover as

well?" Yosan's hips jerked upward, shoving his cock so deep into Jennar's throat that Jennar had to work hard at not choking. Yosan did that for a while until he was satisfied. "Good, good ... roll over," Yosan said. "I want to do something else." He was a year older than Jennar, but seemed to feel no pleasure anywhere except his cock, the only place he'd let Jennar touch him. It was also his weapon of choice when wrestling with Jennar.

"Not now," Jennar said, all the pleasure gone out of the moment. If there was one part of Yosan's visits he detested, it was this. He backed away, but not quick enough. Yosan wrapped his arms around Jennar's waist and used his weight to force Jennar to the ground. Jennar twisted and squirmed, attempting to get out of his grip, but Yosan crawled forward just enough to lock his arm around Jennar's throat. "I don't want to wrestle!"

Yosan laughed as he spat on the fingers of his free hand and then maneuvered them between Jennar's buttocks. Jennar groaned. For Yosan, gentleness was a concept he couldn't quite seem to grasp. Yosan like things rough; why didn't everyone else? Their needs were secondary to his own.

"At least use the—" Jennar said, scrabbling for the bowl of animal grease that was just out of his reach.

Yosan laughed again. "That stuff's for weaklings. I don't need it."

"I do—*aieeee!*" Jennar yelped as Yosan's hardened cock forced its way inside. It burned, and, for a long time, Jennar's world narrowed to a pinpoint of pain. Yosan's arm was so tight that Jennar could hardly breathe, let alone object or do anything to escape the harsh treatment.

"Relax. You're the most reluctant cat I've been with," Yosan said, referring to the totem animals. "All of the others are practically purring when I'm doing this. You—you yelp like a fox in a trap!"

That was because Jennar wasn't a cat—but he would never, never tell anyone otherwise. Even if he *was* a cat, he doubted he would enjoy Yosan's rough treatment. He gritted his teeth and grabbed a handful of fur, hoping that Yosan would have his fill soon. Why was it that the other young men and several women all seemed to enjoy this, and Jennar didn't? The pain wasn't pleasant, but he could deal with it. Something was missing, and he silently berated himself for putting up with Yosan's treatment. There had to be more to sex than the quick roughness Yosan gave him.

After a while, Yosan let out a cry of victory. He stopped pumping and eased his cock out before collapsing in a languid heap atop Jennar. "See? You're the best. I told you so."

Jennar thought of a thousand things to say to that, and none of them polite. Before he could answer, noise from outside the tent caught his attention. Jennar paused for a moment, then kicked Yosan aside, ignoring the ache in his own unfulfilled cock. "Hey!" The young man squealed. "I'm not done yet!"

Jennar ignored him and crawled forward enough to peek outside. His tent faced the women's fires, and their squabbling easily reached his ears. The shaman stood near the women's fire, holding a ragged old fur that Jennar recognized as belonging to Niann. He shook it at Lea. "Where is he?"

Jennar's mother kicked at the remaining blankets. "Worthless brat. He didn't come back after I sent him for berries. If he doesn't come home at night, it serves him right to not have anything to come back to," she said, and rifled through the blankets. "I bet he's run away, and good riddance."

"Miserable woman! It was your duty to keep an eye on him. Why didn't you tell anyone he didn't come back?"

"Would it have mattered?" Lea countered. "I know you and my brother are keeping him here for something, because you think he's special in some way, but he's shown no sign of it. He's lazy, always shirking his chores because he thinks he has somewhere better to be! I don't have the time to keep after him. Would that he had died in the dirt where he was born."

Heyka flung the fur into the dirt, sending up a cloud of dust. "You will see. The tribe will see. If anything has happened to him, if he is dead, I—" Heyka choked. "*We* are lost."

Jennar heard the mistake and the emotion in Heyka's voice. Niann was more important to him than Jennar had thought, maybe even valuable, if what Lea said was true and not something said in the heat of anger.

Unfazed, Lea shook her head. "If he's so important, *you* should have been the one looking after him!" She threw up her hands and walked away.

"What is it?" Yosan clambered up behind Jennar and tried to nudge his erection—another one already?—between Jennar's unprotected buttocks.

Jennar swatted him away. "Niann. He's missing." Anger burned in his chest along with a piercing worry. He doubted Niann remembered him. The boy hardly glanced in Jennar's direction, and when he did, it was with a hurt look in his eyes because Jennar had become man and a warrior while Niann remained tied to the women.

"The outsider? I never understood why you worried about him so much. He isn't even old enough to bed. Besides, he's not a man, like we are!" Yosan laughed and grabbed Jennar's cock.

Jennar wasn't in the mood anymore. He shoved Yosan hard enough that the other man fell backward. "That's enough. Go find someone else to mount."

In the distance, the women continued to laugh and gossip. "Wolves," said one. "Bears," said another, but it was obvious none of them cared what had happened to the boy. Fabric ripped as the ragged blankets were torn and parceled out to make something more useful.

Sullen, Yosan sat up and rubbed his own cock. "At least let me—"

"Out. Now!" Jennar grabbed him under the arms and aimed him toward the tent's entrance.

"Ow! I'm going, I'm going!" Yosan said. "You don't have to be such a sullen cat." He clutched his breechclout to his crotch and went outside. The women tittered when they saw him.

Jennar stayed inside and brooded over Niann, his own pain forgotten. He'd promised to take care of the boy, but as an unrelated man, it wasn't his place to interfere, anyway. Maybe Niann really had run away. His life certainly wasn't pleasant or easy. More likely, the women were right, even in jest. Bears and panthers roamed the woods, and Niann, untrained and unarmed, would have no way to defend himself. The tension in Jennar's gut increased. He grabbed his bow and arrows, a hemp rope, and a flask of water with a strap to loop over his head and ducked out of his tent just in time to see Heyka approaching.

"You're going to look for him. Good."

Streaks of silver colored Heyka's beaded hair, but Jennar had never thought of him as old, until now, when the shaman looked as though something very dear to him was at stake. "It's my honor and duty to go."

"Lea asked him to find *haka* berries. He headed west."

Jennar nodded and set off. At twenty-two, he was already respected among the tribe as a superb hunter and tracker, but even with all his skills, Niann proved hard to find. Even if the boy hadn't had a father to teach him, he still knew enough of the tribe's ways not to disturb the plants and wildlife when he passed. Visiting the nearest *haka* bushes proved futile; they were all picked over with no sign of Niann. He'd have to go farther.

And then, Jennar turned toward one of the dried river trails, and caught sight of a kala deer. He held his breath and paused, out of respect. The kala deer was the tribe's totem animal, and the tribe emulated many of the deer's ways. To find a pure white hide in winter was a rarity, and the hide was used as a courting-gift. It was far softer and warmer than the brown summer coat the deer wore now. In any season, the deer was a symbol of love, courtship and mating.

When his awe of the deer had faded, the animal turned and nosed at something. A basket, half-filled with *haka* berries. Just beyond it, nestled between two boulders, sat a bush freshly scoured of its prizes. "Niann?"

No answer. Jennar walked slowly toward the bush and the deer, surprised to see the dark slit of a crevice just behind them. He knelt down and peered inside. Down below, he could just make out the shape of a body lying in a strip of sunlight. "Niann!"

Still no response. It frightened him to see the boy lying so still. Jennar set his bow and arrows aside and tied the rope around the base of the bush, wary of the thorns. He'd scratched himself once and had been feverish for a week. A few tugs and Jennar decided the bush was strong

enough to hold his weight.

Moments later, he was at the bottom of the crevice beside Niann. The boy's skin was hot and sweaty from more than just lying in the sun. His arm was bent crookedly, dirt covered long, ragged gashes in his leg, and he smelled of blood and illness and other things.

Jennar looked up, and the kala deer was gone as if it had never been. He murmured a prayer of thanks. He was certain he wouldn't have found Niann, otherwise.

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The sun went away, but Niann still felt sick and dizzy. His arm and leg hurt terribly, and between the pain and the illness he thought he heard the sound of someone calling his name.

"Niann?"

He opened his eyes and decided he must be hallucinating. Out of all the people in the tribe to search for him, why would it be Jennar? He was naked except for a breechclout, and the dark skin of his muscled chest glowed in the thin shaft of sunlight and made Niann's heart race faster. Jennar was handsome and popular, too much so to be the one expected to come find him. A flask of water touched Niann's lips, and he drank greedily until Jennar pulled it away and prodded at Niann's chest and limbs. The sudden pain when Jennar touched his arm made it all too evident that this was no hallucination. He couldn't stop himself from crying out.

Jennar, too, looked pained. "Your arm is broken. I have to set the bone before I move you. It's going to hurt, but I'll do it as quick as I can. Will you be brave for me?" His strong hand gripped Niann's shoulders, and the warm brown eyes held only concern and compassion.

Niann nodded, flushed with a heat that had nothing to do with his injuries. If only he weren't hurt, if Jennar would come to him like this as he took so many other young men into his tent... .

Jennar found a stick and placed it between the boy's teeth. Niann closed his eyes, vowing to be brave before his idol. A quick wrench, a streak of pain, and Niann screamed as loud as he could with the stick in his mouth. So much for the bravery.

"I'm sorry." Jennar removed the stick. "Let's get out of here, and I'll make you a proper splint for it. Sit up. There's a good boy." Jennar helped him sit up and then turned, squatting with his back to Niann. "Put your good arm around my neck; there you go, and now your legs around my waist. Hang on tight."

He did. Niann circled Jennar's neck with his good arm and wrapped his legs around Jennar's waist. Even with this comfort, it was hard to be brave and not cry out from pain while Jennar climbed the rope to safety. The sweat from Jennar's skin stung the wounds in his leg, but he held on, gritting his teeth, tears leaking from his eyes.

Once above, Niann let go and would have crumpled to the ground if Jennar hadn't caught him

and eased him down. The boy lay still while Jennar tended to him. He watched as the hunter found two strong sticks and bound them to his arm with a few strips of leather. A few drops from Jennar's flask trickled over the wounds in his leg, and Jennar used a soft leaf to wipe away what blood he could. By then, Niann felt dizzy and hot all over. Jennar's hand against his cheek was uncomfortable.

The hunter didn't look happy. "You have a wound-fever already." He lifted Niann as gently as he could, but it still hurt. Niann whimpered. His head lolled against Jennar's shoulder. The hunter's arms supported Niann's legs and back, comfortable, like they'd done this before. Niann felt confused. He barely knew Jennar. So why did the hunter's touch feel so familiar?

And why didn't Niann want Jennar to ever let him go?

"Poor little one. Let me take you to Heyka. He'll know what to do so you can feel better."

"No!" Niann used his good hand to clutch Jennar's arm. "I have to go to the dreaming-place. He said so."

"Who?"

"The deer. I have to go. Have to."

Jennar paused. For a moment, Niann thought the hunter would do as he wished.

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The boy was daft. A result of his illness. Jennar wouldn't consider taking him up the mountain. "I can't take you. You're injured and ill besides, and I wouldn't be able to carry you that far." What was the boy thinking?

"Please. I have to go. He said so."

The insistence made Jennar wonder, but it also frightened him. The spirits often used illness as a way to reach those in the tribe, which meant that Niann probably had heard the deer speak.

But the dreaming-place was a half-day's walk away, and Jennar was in no hurry to return there. He'd already denied the gods once, and was willing enough to do so again if it meant saving Niann's life. Niann's fever was to the point that Jennar was frightened for him. "When you're well," Jennar said. "The gods can't ask more of you than that."

"They won't let me go when I'm well. I'm an outcast. You have to take me."

"No." The idea was ridiculous. "We're going to the shaman before you get worse."

"Take me, Jennar. You have to."



"When you're better. Not now."

Over Niann's protests, he gathered the young man in his arms and walked back to the camp. Jennar didn't know whether to be annoyed or grateful that Niann was still small for someone nearly a man. Was it lack of care, or a trait of his unknown people? Whichever it was, he was light enough to be no burden to Jennar for the long walk.

Several of the women, his mother included, actually had the gall to look disappointed at seeing their orphan returned and in such a sickly state. Jennar ignored them and headed straight to the shaman's tent.

Heyka took one terrified, grateful look at Niann and waved Jennar inside. The shaman kindled a fire and threw purifying herbs into it, filling the tent with a sweet, green scent. He boiled a cup of willow bark tea and held Niann's head to pour most of it down the boy's throat. After a while, Niann's twitching eased and his breathing became even, allowing the shaman to look more closely at him. He spent time adjusting the splint on Niann's arm while praising Jennar for his good work in setting the bone and then made a poultice to lay over the gashes in Niann's leg to draw out the sickness.

Jennar bit his lip. He'd promised to take care of Niann, and besides, it was what any good tribesman should do, though few would stay at a sickbed besides the shaman. A female family member would usually come, to make sure their loved one stayed clean and comfortable, but Niann had no family, no female that loved him.

He flushed as he looked down at Niann, and then berated himself for it. He'd promised to protect the boy, not think lustful thoughts about him. Niann wasn't of age, and besides, he was an outsider. The tribe prohibited relationships with outsiders for fear their people would be contaminated.

But—he was pretty enough to stir Jennar's desire, even as he lay ill and injured. There were only a few subtle differences to mark Niann as being from outside the tribe, but they worked in his favor. His eyes were larger, rounder, his skin a little lighter than Jennar's dark walnut. His face was finer-boned, as if chiseled from a smooth beech rather than a gnarled oak like so many of the tribesmen. "What of his injuries? Will he be completely healed?"

The shaman brushed his hand down Niann's injured leg. Even in the dim light, the leg was obviously swollen and streaked with red. A bad sign. "It is difficult to tell. If this infection does not claim his life or his leg, it is still doubtful he will recover fully." The shaman trailed a finger up Niann's leg to his stomach and chest. "The poison has had more than a day to work itself into his body. At best, he will be ill for some time before recovering, and at worst, he will die. In between, he will live, but be crippled. That is the most likely."

Jennar hissed, finding it difficult to keep from deriding the others in the camp. If they'd only gone out sooner to find him, Niann wouldn't be at risk of dying. It wasn't fair to treat such a beautiful boy so, even if he was an outsider and an orphan. He'd been born inside the camp. That should have been enough to make him Kehani, but it didn't.

"He will live," Jennar said. "I'm certain of it. I would have missed him, if it weren't for a kala deer to show me the way. Someone is watching out for him. I think he had a vision, too. He said a deer told him to go to the dreaming-place. Niann begged me to take him, but I wouldn't. He's too ill."

"You did right." The shaman's eyes gleamed with interest. "A kala deer, eh?" He looked back toward his sleeping patient. "You are fortunate indeed, young Niann. The gods have blessed you."

He didn't look fortunate, not with his breathing weak and erratic and his left leg swollen to twice its normal size. Jennar palmed the boy's heated face, willing him to have strength, and to survive.

### CHAPTER THREE

After Jennar had taken Niann to Heyka, the shaman refused to let Jennar inside the tent again. "He needs his rest, and I cannot meditate on his healing with others present."

Jennar supposed that much was true, but it chafed at him to be kept away from Niann. For several days, he ate little and spoke less, keeping to himself as much as he could.

Even Yosan noticed his moodiness. "What's wrong, Cat?" he asked when Jennar dropped his loin wrap and let Yosan mount him without a fuss. "You're not half as much fun like this." Yosan used him anyway, but Jennar didn't care. He welcomed the burn of Yosan's cock inside his body and stared at the far side of the tent where his deer carving lay half-finished. He didn't want to think of the possibility that Niann might not live to hold another carving.

Niann had to live. He *had* to. Heyka was a powerful healer with the snake as his totem. Jennar had seen him mend wounds from bears and mountain lions, and repair bones that had been broken so severely they stuck out from the skin. Niann was only ill. Surely it was within the shaman's abilities to heal him?

Above him, Yosan grunted and finally spilled his seed. "That was a good one. So good, it might take me a while to walk out of here."

Walk. The shaman's warning came back to Jennar. If Niann lived, he would more than likely be crippled. He'd need help walking—and that, at least, was something Jennar could do for him.

Jennar stood and grabbed his loin wrap along with his carving knife. "Where are you going?" Yosan asked, grabbing at Jennar's ankle. "Don't leave—give me a few moments and I'll be ready to go again!"

Slipping free, Jennar left his tent and then the camp for the solitude of the woods. Among the trees, he searched until he found the perfect staff, a long, strong piece of oak that branched out at one end. He dropped where he was, held the branch across his lap, and began carving. Chips flew from the wood as he gave himself over to the process and let his hands move where they would. He hardly had to think of what to carve; the pattern formed completely in his mind, and it took little effort to bring forth the images embedded in the wood.

He worked until it was too dark to see and then went back to the camp to work by firelight. "Jennar?" Yosan's strong hands shook him. "That's enough. You have to sleep."

Jennar shrugged him off and kept working. When morning came, his hands were raw and blistered. Rough outlines of animals appeared along the length of the staff, but he wasn't done,

not nearly so. His uncle derided him for his dedication. "You neglect your duties," the chief said. "And for what? A boy that may not live? You're not a child anymore. He's not an infant that needs care. You waste your time."

Mute, Jennar kept on. His uncle stalked away finally, furious. Jennar was only partially aware of it. The part of his mind that warned Jennar of future punishments for his actions was stored elsewhere.

Yosan came again, this time bringing a gourd of water and a few strips of dried jerky Jennar could chew and still keep his hands busy. Jennar jerked when he felt Yosan's hands on his shoulders and back. "Relax. I won't make you give up your work. It means too much to you, I can see. You're tense. Let me help."

He did, massaging the worst knots from Jennar's muscles with a gentleness Jennar hadn't suspected. The Badger's unselfishness surprised him, but didn't deter Jennar from his project. Yosan worked for a while, occasionally sticking a strip of jerky into Jennar's mouth. Morning fled into afternoon and then night. Closer. The animals now had shape and form. It was only the finer details of fur, feathers and scales that remained.

Behind him, Yosan hissed. "Your hands, Jennar, look at your hands!"

He didn't stop to think about his hands, or anything else, still caught up in the trance of carving. Jennar kept going, putting every bit of love and skill into it that he could. Niann needed this, to be reminded that someone loved him. If Jennar couldn't be in the tent with him, then the staff would have to do.

The last notch came at dawn. With it, the trance lost its hold, and Jennar's body screamed from ill-treatment. His bladder was painfully full, his back and muscles cramped from his posture, despite Yosan's massages, and his hands—

"Here." Yosan was suddenly beside him, helping Jennar to stand on shaky legs. "He'd better be worth all this." Yosan gently held one of Jennar's hands and turned it palm upward to see it blistered and bleeding with the roughness of the wood and the knife peeling away chunks of skin.

"I have to—" Jennar started, embarrassed when he felt another, urgent need. Now that the trance had passed, his hands hurt too badly to touch anything.

"I thought you might." Yosan untied Jennar's loin wrap and turned to pick up the staff while his friend relieved himself.

Jennar looked back at him, worried when he heard Yosan's swift intake of breath.

"I thought—I thought it moved. They look so real," Yosan said in awe. He twisted the staff around to examine every detail. Jennar watched, as anxious as a mother over a newborn. Yosan saw Jennar's expression and laughed as he re-wrapped Jennar's waist. "Come on. Nothing's

going to happen to your precious staff. Let's get your hands seen to."

They found Heyka outside, breathing deeply of the morning air. He quirked an eyebrow when he saw the staff, and frowned at the sight of Jennar's bloodied hands. Jennar trembled as the shaman took the staff from Yosan and ran his fingers along its length. "So this is what kept you these past two days? A fine piece of work. Very fine. I'll get something for your hands." The shaman bent to duck inside.

"It's for Niann," Jennar said. "I have to give it to him myself."

Something akin to jealousy sparked in Heyka's eyes before he schooled his expression back to his usual calm. "Very well. Come, but move and speak quietly." He held out the staff, which Jennar held by balancing one end in the crook of his elbow and pinning the other to his body with his other arm.

The air inside the tent remained thick with a miasma of incense and illness. Niann looked worse, with yellowed skin and body jerking in uncontrolled spasms. His eyes were half open, but Jennar doubted he was aware of his surroundings. Jennar knelt down beside him and laid the staff alongside his feverish body. "I made this for you, so you know that someone here cares for you and wants you to get well." He noted the shaman's grim, reserved expression, which made Jennar defensive. "He will live. I know he will." He hoped he wasn't fooling himself.

The shaman gathered a few things to treat Jennar's hands and said, "Outside, so we don't disturb him."

After his hands were liberally slathered with ointment and wrapped in compresses, Yosan took Jennar back to his tent, where he collapsed into sleep. When he woke, his uncle was there, staring down at him in disapproval. Jennar flinched, wondering what sort of punishment he'd earned.

The chief cleared his throat. "I have proposed a trade with our valley brethren. One of our warriors for one of theirs, to learn ways in which we can strengthen each other. I have chosen you for this honor."

It *was* an honor, Jennar knew, but one he didn't want right then. He bit back a retort, that if his uncle cared so much to learn about a related tribe, why couldn't he be bothered to learn anything about Niann? "Thank you, Uncle, but my responsibilities lie here with my tribe."

The chief jerked his head back toward the shaman's tent. "Do you think I don't know what you stay for? Why else would you spend days carving a walking-stick for a boy too sick to use it? An orphan boy. Crippled, now, and a burden to our tribe! He's not fit company for you. Look at your hands—they're ruined!"

Jennar gazed at his uncle, defiant. "He's done nothing except to be born from the wrong womb. It's cruel to shame him by keeping him chained to the women."

"I'm beginning to wonder if you weren't born from the wrong womb yourself! What put these thoughts into your head? I don't want you associating with this boy. Take any other from the tribe. Any five of *our* people would be better than one outsider."

Jennar's face burned. So that was it. His uncle thought he meant to take Niann as a mate. Bedding men was no shame, and certainly no secret, but bedding an outsider of either sex was the ultimate taboo.

His uncle's face softened and he rested a hand on Jennar's upper arm. "I want to see you strong, the hunter and warrior I know you can be. This boy is a threat to that—just look at what you've done to yourself over the past few days! It would have been better had he been left for dead."

Jennar jerked out of his grip. "Left for dead! He could be a productive, valuable member of this tribe if you'd only give him a chance!"

The chief gestured toward the tent. "What chance has he now? The shaman tells me he has been delirious for days. Leave him," the chief said, and this time it was not an offer. "Make your people proud by aiding the valley tribe. By the time you return, you will have forgotten about your orphan, if he still lives."

"He will live," Jennar said, his voice choked. Rage flooded through him, but he forced it to turn inward. He could not show such emotion toward his uncle. And, more dangerous than his supposed flirtation with Niann, Jennar heard something else in his uncle's voice. Disappointment. Did he know--?

Jennar swallowed his fear. His uncle couldn't know about his trip to the dreaming-place, otherwise he would have said something, and Jennar would have been punished. "When? How long?"

"You'll set out tomorrow and stay until a crop of their sons seek visions. At least a year. Two, more likely."

Jennar swallowed. "Two years." Niann. Gods, who would care for the boy if he was gone? No one at all. He gathered his legs beneath him to stand. "I should—"

The chief blocked his way. "No. You shouldn't. Gather your things, Jennar. Leave in the morning."

He gave his uncle one last look of disgust as the chief left his tent. His only regret was leaving Niann and not being able to tell the boy how much he cared.

## CHAPTER FOUR

The boy *would* live, Heyka decided, but it had taken eight days to be sure. Curing Niann had taken every healing skill the shaman had. The leg was the worst, still swollen and grotesque. The shaman kept watch for the blackness that meant the limb was dying. So far, he hadn't seen any. Good.

He was surprised by the way he'd come to care for Niann. Heyka had let the boy run after him, both to be sure nothing happened to Niann, and because he might as well teach the boy something useful. He meant to keep the boy at an emotional distance, because what he saw for Niann's future boded ill for attachment. Instead, Niann's constant, willing presence had slowly weakened Heyka's resolve to the point that the shaman had been panicked by the thought of losing Niann, and not just because of the power he would soon have. He'd grown fond of Niann, far fonder than he should be.

The risk of losing him had not yet gone, but it had lessened. Oddly enough, the staff Jennar had given him seemed to comfort the boy. He'd been more relaxed while holding it, so the shaman hadn't tried to take it away. He didn't care for Jennar's obsession with Niann, but this time he was willing to let it pass. Much of his dislike for Jennar was for a reason Heyka didn't like to admit. The young hunter was indeed handsome, and had made no secret of his preference for men. Heyka couldn't allow Niann to be wooed away. Letting Jennar be the one to rescue him might have been a mistake, but Heyka had been unwilling to send anyone but the best tracker.

Jennar had other talents, besides. The staff fascinated Heyka. Jennar's skill was obvious in the detailed animals that ran the length of the wood, but there was another, less visible talent that none but the shaman could see, and one Jennar remained unaware of.

The shaman ran his fingers along the carving of the deer's head. Beyond the exquisite detail, Jennar had managed to capture the true essence of the animal, a rare trait in any tribe, not just the Kehani. The wood, and the animals carved into it, felt alive, and if he didn't look directly at it he would have sworn they moved.

Jennar was no bobcat, but whatever had happened to him at the dreaming-place remained a mystery that would have to keep unless Jennar broached the subject himself. No one, not even a shaman, was allowed to pry into private spiritual matters unless he was asked.

Heyka turned his attention back to his patient. His totem animal, the Snake, had been with him almost constantly for the past several days. The shaman had needed the snake's guidance to set Niann's shattered body to rights. He was a powerful healer, at the height of his skills and strength. Age would not diminish them, nor, at this point, would it enhance them further. He'd learned all he could on this plane of existence, saved many lives, repaired many bodies, yet he felt a growing sense of dissatisfaction. What else was there for him here?

Since he was a child, he always had the feeling that he didn't belong, that he was destined for something more. He learned everything he could about life and what kept it going or ended it,

and wasn't surprised at all to find his totem animal to be the snake, a powerful healer, and a harbinger of change. Snakes shed their skin to begin anew—when, Heyka wondered, would he be able to shed his?

He'd traveled when he was younger, visiting all of the friendly tribes and learning what he could from his fellow shamans. Power of any sort attracted him like a bee to nectar. Several cautioned him, warning that healers could not be so selfish as to heal for themselves, but must always keep their patient's needs in mind.

He listened, but ignored their advice. What good was power if one didn't use it? Wasn't using his power to heal as much for himself as it was for the sick? As he traveled, the feeling of disillusionment and not belonging grew. He wasn't like the other shamans. He was different. At twenty-two, he already felt old, as if he'd seen all the world had to offer him.

And then he met an itinerant holy woman who wandered from tribe to tribe whether her services were needed or not. She offered herself for his bed—and gave him the way out he'd been longing for.

She was beautiful, her skin a dark nut-brown from days spent wandering in the sun. Beads from a dozen different tribes adorned her hair, gathered in hundreds of tiny braids. She clacked when she moved. Her leather shirt and pants were worn but clean and decorated with beads and embroidery. The tattoo at the base of her neck indicated her totem animal—a kala deer.

He wasn't fond of women, as a rule, but his disinterest spurred her on to do whatever she could to tempt him. She followed him into his tent and draped an arm around his shoulders. "Didn't anyone ever tell you that a Deer is here to bring you blessings?" She teased him by tracing his lips with her finger. "*Some* say that taking a blessing from a Deer can take you to a higher plane, one shared by the animal spirits." Lips replaced her finger. He shuddered, and felt the power within her. "Legend has it that one lucky man gained power enough from a deer to transcend, to live with the animal spirits forever."

His body caught fire with her touch, but his mind erupted with the holocaust of possibility. If it was true—if there was even the remotest chance—

"Bless me, holy one," he said. Their lips met and locked, as she fingered the laces on her shirt. In haste, he helped her, drawing the shirt up from the bottom to tug over her head. The pants followed, as he gripped the waistband and forced it down around her hips until she could step out of them. They sank down to the fur-covered floor of the tent, still embracing.

He didn't look, *really* look, until his hand wandered down her chest and found something unexpected. Her voice, her manners, her actions, everything was female—but the body before him was not.

The chest was flat, muscled and well-kept. Between the legs sprouted an erection by one of the most gorgeous cocks Heyka had ever seen. Long and thick and perfect. Instant lust made it hard to resist putting his mouth on it immediately, to run his tongue along the sensitive skin and feel



the body beneath him twitch with pleasure ...

The incongruity attracted him all the more, and he knew that the holy ones who were a woman in the body of a man had an extra sort of power when they found a balance between the sexes.

"Tell me," he said. "Tell me everything. Bless me with your body as well as your story."

She—because her voice and movements made it impossible to think of her as anything but, despite the disparate body parts—took her time undressing him, running soft hands against his chest and using deft fingers to tease the knots of his loin wrap until it fell. She talked to him, and told him her story while she pressed her warm, bare body against his and fingered his erection.

"My mother didn't know, or wouldn't tell who my father was. We were shunned by her own tribe. The stress of it killed her. They left me on my own, until I sought my totem animal. Then, suddenly, I was special. A holy being. I would have none of them. I left right after my ceremony, and have been wandering ever since, giving my blessing to those who wish it."

She kissed his cheek, his neck, trailed her tongue around his nipple, all the while giving his cock the most intense massage he'd ever felt. He let the sensation wash over him before he could speak. "Your ceremony—how did it work? What does having a kala deer for a totem mean?"

"Curious, aren't you?" she said. She turned her back to him and sat on his lap with her legs bent but wide, teasing his hard cock with her fleshy buttocks. He wrapped his arms around her, and she didn't resist as he finally wrapped his hand around her cock. She told him the details of the ceremony as he cupped her balls in one hand, gently manipulating them until she arched against him in pleasure. Hearing about the rites roused him even more; while most participated in games of strength or skill as befit their totem animal, Deer showed their sexual prowess. He could only hope to be part of such an initiation for a holy one. Those chosen by the kala deer were rare, once in a generation, if that.

"As for what it means, that I'll have to show you." She reached backward to clasp her hands behind his neck, and twisted her head around to kiss him on the lips. He accepted her tongue into his mouth and let it explore. His hands slid down her muscled chest, stopping to tease her nipples, before dropping back down to her cock.

He gazed down at her, no longer able to control the urges in his body. His grip around her shaft was fiercer than he meant it to be, but she understood.

"Everything I am is freely given," she said. Her smile turned wry. "Snake. I can sense it now. You're a healer and a strong one. I can bring you more."

Ah. So that was her trick. Bringing strength to those she blessed by way of their totem animal. He felt a burst of strength, and knew that she, too, benefited from the encounter. He wanted all of her. *Now*. Holding her wasn't enough.

She let him maneuver her onto her stomach. He bent down and parted her buttocks, licking between the crevice, and then rimming the wrinkled muscle of her rear entrance. She sighed, but

did nothing to discourage his actions. Blindly, he dug through his pile of medicines until he found the bowl of animal grease, which he kept for paints and lubrication. He slathered a generous dose onto his first two fingers and carefully worked his way inside her body. She was good at this; her body yielded to him as none ever had. His fingers explored, teasing the internal pleasure point until she writhed beneath his touch.

Shivering with need, he removed his fingers and lifted her hips to make it easier to reach her. He spared the time to rub his cock with the grease, and then jammed himself inside to find her slick and warm with a wonderful tightness. He pulled out, then thrust in again, hard. The more intense the encounter, the more energy they both gained, but he wanted more.

She couldn't, wouldn't say no, not even when he reached around her waist to grab her erection in a brutal, bruising grip. Thumb and forefinger ringed the base of her cock while his other three fingers squeezed her balls. He drove himself faster, viciously, his need and desire rising to fever pitch. He could feel her energy rising alongside his own, almost as if he could reach out and grab it.

So he did.

Her eyes snapped open, aware that something had gone wrong. He ignored her reaction. Power. He felt it leap from her body to his. He thrust inside her, over and over, not listening to her moans of pain. More. He latched onto the energy and drew it into himself, absorbing it, storing it for later. "Tell me... if the story is true. How did... a Deer... send someone to the plane of the gods?"

She couldn't answer. She didn't need to. Even as he asked, Heyka could feel himself rising out of his body. The climax as he released his seed was enough to catapult him into another world.

The story *was* true. He could see the plane where the animal totems gathered, bright and warm and welcoming. His own totem animal was there, and Heyka reached out in greeting, but was too insubstantial to do anything more. A cry of despair escaped his lips. He wanted to be there. He *belonged* there, but he didn't have enough power to stay there on his own.

Then, abruptly, the energy dissipated and he dropped back into his own body. "No," he said in disappointment. "Take me back!" The holy one lay beneath him, limp, drool trickling from the corner of her mouth. His own body was too spent to make more than a feeble attempt at another erection. He compensated by rolling her over onto her back and rubbing at her abused cock, sticky with seed. "Come on! Take me back! I have to go back!" He kept tugging at that energy link he'd felt from her until it, too, faded.

She didn't move. Eventually, she stopped breathing.

Heyka sat naked, staring at her for a long time. Beaded hair jutted in odd directions from her head. Her frozen expression showed pain and confusion.

A long time later, when the moon was high, he carried her into the woods and buried her. She

was a wanderer. No one would look for her, or question her absence. He felt an odd sort of hollowness as he tamped the earth down around her. It wasn't grief for causing her death, but what she represented. A way into another world, where he could stay and be welcome. Where he belonged. Next time he found a Deer, he wouldn't be so careless.

Forty years later, the shaman had lost all hope of ever finding a Deer for his own—until Niann. Having the boy here made his longings more severe. So much power so close to his fingertips, and unusable until the boy sought his own totem animal and came of age.

Later that evening, the shaman's tent flap opened to reveal another visitor. "Well?" the chief asked.

Heyka looked up from his twitching patient. "The same as yesterday and the day before. The fever has a strong hold on him."

"We need him. The tribe needs to be revitalized."

The shaman's eyes flicked up and down the chief's aging body and thought that it was the chief as much as his tribe that needed "revitalized." He understood the chief's concerns; for several years, the vitality of the tribe seemed to be waning. Game and gathered food were adequate, but not plentiful. There were more petty squabbles among the people. Fewer babies were born, and several that were showed a certain apathy or stupidity. "Even if he is deer-touched, it will be some time before we can make use of him, and we won't even know for sure who his totem is until he goes to the dreaming-place."

"It has to be the Bright One," the chief said, his voice almost plaintive. "Jennar said it was a kala deer that led him to the boy when he disappeared."

"So he did." Beside the shaman, the boy twitched when he heard Jennar's name. The crutch lay beside Niann, and the boy grasped it and rubbed his fingers against it for comfort.

The chief saw the movement, then turned away. "I'm sending my nephew away. For his own good."

The shaman remained silent. Jennar was a disappointment to his uncle, forever trying to sneak away to check on Niann. Never mind that the young man was one of the best hunters and carvers they'd had in a generation; the chief was terrified of anything that might ruin the chance that Niann was deer-touched. He'd forbidden anyone to teach Niann the ways of manhood, for fear that the boy would wind up in someone's bed and be ruined. Several childless men had offered to sponsor Niann, but the chief had refused them all, so Niann was relegated to the women's fires. The chief had figured it would keep the boy safer and more manageable. He'd been wrong on both counts.

In the end, it didn't matter. Niann was here, and alive. Soon they would know for sure if he was deer-touched. It benefited the shaman to let the chief keep his ideas. The less he knew about the truth, the better. The shaman had his own plans for Niann.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Niann remembered little of his first days in the shaman's tent. Fever dreams, the old man told him. He could remember no images clearly, but he was certain that several of the dreams involved Jennar, and doing more with the hunter than just holding on to the man. He could remember the feel of Jennar's warm, strong body next to his, the gentle eyes and the surety as Jennar carried him to safety.

His arm eventually healed, but the wound in his leg festered. Too many nights were spent biting down on a stick, trying not to cry out, as the shaman stoked herb-laced fires and dosed him with more healing teas. The shaman's kind, familiar voice helped soothe him, but he found himself longing for Jennar's gentle arms. No one else had ever treated him with such kindness, and Jennar's touch had made the pain go away.

But Jennar didn't come. Niann sweated and shivered in the shaman's tent and listened to the old man as he chanted to sing the sickness away. The air was thick with pungent herbs and the bitter smell of infection. Draught after draught was poured down his throat, and Niann drifted away in a drug-induced haze, finding more solace in his dreams than he had in his daily life. More than once, he heard a voice call, *Come to me, come to me*, but, try as he might, he couldn't go. The shaman's strong arms held him down.

It was almost five moons later when at last he was well enough to sit up and be aware of his surroundings. With trepidation, he swept aside the heavy fur to look at his leg. Tears sprung to his eyes, shameful for a boy his age, but he couldn't help it. His right leg was a little thin, like the rest of him, but his left looked like a desiccated tree branch. The skin was brown and rough as a dried leaf, and it looked as though he had no muscle at all, only bone. The shaman had to help him stand. Not only was Niann weak, but he was off-balance, and his crippled leg was hardly more than a dead weight beneath him, able to be moved only if Niann swung it from his hip.

He sank back down into the furs, knowing now that he would never be a hunter, never be the man he should have been. He'd never be strong, like Jennar. And he knew what happened to the crippled and weak deer in the kala herd. They were culled. What would the tribe do with him now that he was useless?

His fumbling hand found something bumpy and hard. Grasping at it, he pulled out a staff with a crotch on top at just the right height for Niann to tuck under his arm. Niann stared at it, stunned to see the detailed carvings. Bear and owl and wolf twined up the staff, and at the top was a kala deer's head with splayed antlers. He recognized the carving style. His hand went immediately to the fox talisman, which, by some miracle, still hung around his neck. The style was the same. "Who did this?" he asked, waving the crutch.

The shaman looked baffled. "Jennar."

Jennar? It couldn't be. Rescuing him was one thing, but leaving him such a gift? Why would he bother with someone like Niann? "And this?" He held out the fox carving with a sudden suspicion.

"Don't you know? Jennar."

"Where is he? Why didn't he come?"

"Does it matter?" Fondly, Heyka stroked Niann's head.

Niann bit his lip and fought the wave of need that rushed over him. The memory of Jennar's arms was still fresh and filled Niann with longing. Jennar had never come to visit him here in the tent. Not once. The crutch was a gift fit for a cripple. Jennar had probably made this for him out of pity, and then forgotten him. He had no use for a weakling like Niann.

"Does your leg pain you?" the shaman asked.

It did. Niann bit his lip and nodded, reluctant to have the shaman do anything else for him. The shaman rubbed oil into his palms and slid them along Niann's wasted calf and thigh. Deft and expert, though not nearly as pleasant as Jennar's touch. As soon as Heyka had finished, Niann left the shaman's tent, determined not to go back.

He was heartbroken to find no welcome for him back at the women's fires. Now that he couldn't fetch or carry, he was shunned. The rags he had claimed for a bed were long gone. "Serves you right," Lea said with a nod at his leg. "Trying to run away like you did. Jennar mentioned how far he had to go to find you. This is how the gods punish one as lazy and ungrateful as you."

Tears stung Niann's eyes, but he would not let them fall. He had been ungrateful and unhappy, but he hadn't tried to run away. Nobody listened. No one cared.

His heart ached for a sight of Jennar, but didn't see the man. He couldn't ask anyone else in the camp; the women never spoke to him unless it was to order him around, and the men ignored him completely. He hobbled around on his crutch to see if he could eavesdrop on Jennar's whereabouts, but no one said anything useful, at least not where he could hear.

Night fell and left him with nowhere to sleep. He went back to the bare patch of earth that had once been his sleeping area and curled up, miserable. He hadn't forgotten his need to do as the deer bid and go to the dreaming-place. He wondered if he would even be allowed to go, and if he was, how he would make it up the mountain on his crippled leg.

A touch on his shoulder made him jump. "Jennar?" he asked, hope getting in the way of prudence.

Someone chuckled. "No, young one. Jennar isn't here anymore. Come. I'll take you back to my tent. There's no reason for you to be out here starving and shivering. You'll make yourself ill again."

Heyka. Niann swallowed his disappointment. For a long moment, he didn't move, preferring the uncomfortable dirt to being back inside the shaman's tent.

"Please, Niann. Come with me. Your bad leg means nothing to me. There is a great deal I can teach you that will not involve walking or fetching. You can have a future."

An uncomfortable knot of emotion twisted in Niann's stomach. He wasn't sure what the shaman meant; it could be anything from teaching him the ways of the shaman to taking him as a lover, though with the taboo on relationships with outsiders, it couldn't be the latter. The hand on his shoulder became something more than a gesture of concern. Heyka squeezed, which left Niann even more confused. He wanted someone to care for him, but the shaman seemed almost... possessive.

Then a chill breeze swept by, and Niann made up his mind. With the help of his crutch and the shaman's willing arm, he stood and limped back to the tent. On the way there, he belatedly realized he was eighteen and a man as of that morning.

## CHAPTER SIX

Jennar traveled for two weeks before reaching the valley tribe, the Deshani. By that time, his hands were healed, with a layer of healthy, pink skin to cover the wounds. The chief and his people were glad to see him and made him more than welcome, giving him a fine tent for his own and showering him with gifts such as furs and robes. They had a feast in his honor, so that the entire tribe could come out to meet him and ask questions. The chief, a middle-aged man still in the height of his strength and vitality, talked to Jennar at length about what the children might expect from Jennar's lessons. "For they are our greatest treasure," the chief said, "and it is important they get the best education they can."

Jennar nodded, humbled again by the great responsibility he'd been given. The reverence the valley tribe had for their children stung; what might have happened with Niann if he'd been born here, instead of among the Kehani? Would he have been treated differently? Cherished? Respected? The entire tribe left him stunned. It was so different from his home in the mountains. The people here seemed at peace, and to get along well with one another. Children's laughter carried on the wind as they ran around in play. Men and women mixed, delighted with each other's company. All in all, a much more relaxing and inviting atmosphere than his home tribe.

"You seem thoughtful," the chief said. His wife, Nutmeg, hovered beside him and handed Jennar another bowl of venison stew.

Jennar drank the broth and chewed a chunk of meat before he answered. "I left a friend behind. He was very ill."

"And yet you came to us. We are grateful and will ask the gods to ensure your friend's swift recovery."

Jennar's throat tightened, but he nodded his thanks. At the side of the gathering, he noticed a pair of men, one old and white-haired with a brightly colored robe and hundreds of beads in his hair. The tribe's shaman, Jennar guessed, and the young man at his side must be his apprentice. The younger man, perhaps eighteen or nineteen, sat calmly at his mentor's side, taking in the gregarious crowd, but not participating. As if sensing Jennar's scrutiny, he glanced up. Their eyes met, and Jennar had the immediate sensation of power and knowledge, and Jennar's cock ached with sudden desire. The younger man was handsome, pretty, even, but Jennar could not hold the intense gaze for long. When he looked back, the two men were gone.

Not long after, Jennar pleaded weariness from his travels and sought the comfort of his tent. Just as he'd crawled inside and made ready to sleep, the flap opened, and one of the women, Nutmeg, entered.

He watched, too stunned to move as she proceeded to undress. He'd never lain with a woman, since he hadn't been of marriageable age in the tribe. There were stories, of course, and a few quiet lessons from his mother on how to pleasure a woman, but he'd never had the desire for one. If a woman had wanted a child by him, he probably would have consented, provided she wanted no further intimacies between them.

Now, it seemed, he wasn't being given a choice. Nutmeg was the chief's wife; to refuse her would be an insult.

He'd seen women naked, either bathing or having sex, but having one directly in front of him, and offering herself, was a different matter entirely. Her body was clean and smooth, as brown as the spice she was named after. Her nipples, a darker shade of brown, stood erect on her pointed breasts. Her body was plump in a healthy, attractive way, all curves and enticing folds of skin. Long, black hair was pulled back at the nape of her neck, leaving all of her available to stroke.

"I shouldn't..." he said and looked away. "I'm tired from my journey, and your husband—"

"Wishes me to see to your comfort," she said smoothly. She crouched in front of him, and the sweet scent of her reached his nose. "You're just into manhood, aren't you? You must be. Too shy to be otherwise." She smiled, which made him blush.

He shouldn't, he shouldn't... especially since he wasn't attracted to her. He fought the impulse to back away. He wasn't scared of her, not exactly, but she was... intimidating.

As if sensing his hesitation, she reached over to stroke between his legs. His mind and heart weren't willing, but it didn't mean his body wasn't. The sensation made his cock harden, and her smile widened. He shivered and felt suddenly at a loss. He didn't know what to do next. For all his skill at carving and hunting, bedding a woman was beyond his scope.

Her voice warmed him. "It's all right. I'm here to teach you what you don't know. The other women will want their turn, soon."

The other women? Oh, gods, what was he going to do? "But I don't—"

She mistook his unease. "Hush. It's all right. It's just best if you're a little more experienced by then. We wouldn't want to disappoint them, would we?" One hand slid inside his loincloth while the other worked the knots free. It dropped, and he was exposed, save for the fingers kneading his aching cock. He felt no shame in nakedness; men and women would often bathe side by side at the river. Men and boys fought naked in practice, and afterwards, the men would have a tumble together. But having her here, touching him as no one else had, made him feel both embarrassed and eager.

He knew the basics of what to do and was suddenly determined not to let her think him ignorant. He was here to teach the Deshani much of what he knew, so why not start now, here, inside his



tent?

She let him press her backward until she lay on her back in the soft furs. He took a few moments to rub his cock to stimulate an erection. When he deemed himself hard enough, he looked down at her and tried to figure out the best position.

She raised an eyebrow and crooked her legs open, solving at least part of his dilemma. Frustration was making his erection die; he'd better get on with this, soon. He crawled on top of her, matching his groin to hers. His cock rubbed up against a wetness that both surprised and galled him. How was he supposed to do this? Yosan made it sound so easy. But then, Yosan had always been the one on top.

Knowing she was watching him, and waiting, didn't make things any easier. Grumbling to himself, Jennar grasped his cock and tried to maneuver it to the entrance he knew was there. Once he found it, he slid in far easier than he would have thought. This was nothing like entering a man. It was smooth and slick and warm. His cock perked up at the sensation, and he started pumping.

He did it for a while, but nothing seemed to happen. Nutmeg's face didn't change. If anything, she looked bored. Jennar felt his erection flag again. What was he doing wrong?

Finally, Nutmeg showed some reaction, though not the kind Jennar wanted. She laughed. "Is that all you know?" she asked.

Jennar drew himself out, hurt and embarrassed. "I didn't—I don't—"

Her face softened. She sighed and sat up to face him. "Of course you don't. Let me show you a few things first."

Her hand found his cock, now slick from her fluids. The touch was light and delicate, nothing like Yosan's grabbing paws. He whimpered as her touch invoked an entirely new sensation in him. This was a different kind of lust. Yosan and the boys had been rougher, more apt to seek immediate gratification, but Nutmeg had years of experience in pleasuring her husband and making it last. She threaded her fingers around the back of his neck and pulled him close to kiss. She tasted as sweet as she smelled, and he let his tongue roll against hers, exploring her mouth. She took one of his hands and guided it down to her breast, letting him feel the nipple harden under his exploring fingers.

"Easy," she murmured as he clenched the soft heaviness of her breast in his hand. She pressed forward against him until he had no choice but to lean back until he was lying on the pile of furs that served as his bed. "Relax," she said, and chuckled. "You look more scared than a fawn coming face-to-face with a wolf."

"I'm not scared," he protested.

"Aren't you?" She cocked her head. "Your first time with a woman?"

"No, I—" he started, but was cut off when she bent down to envelop his cock with her mouth. The act itself was nothing new; Yosan had done it several times, but he'd never done it like *this*. She curved her lips inward to cover her teeth and sucked at him while she gently manipulated his balls with one hand. Yosan never did *that* either, always too eager to ram himself into Jennar's behind. Jennar started breathing hard as Nutmeg's ministrations shot tingles of pleasure throughout his body. He loved this, the way her tongue tickled him, right at the tip—

He shuddered, and she stopped. "Not yet." She scooted up until she lay beside him, elbow crooked so she could rest her head on her hand. She tickled his chest. "It's better if we share this. What about me?"

He surged up and kissed her. Moments later, it was her on her back, and this time he felt the stirring of desire that had been missing from before. Jennar stared down at her, still confused at his mix of desires. His body cried out for release, for the continued brushing of flesh against flesh, but his heart still wished devoutly for a man.

"It's all right," she told him, mistaking his hesitation for fear. "It's all right." Legs crooked wide, she wrapped them around his lower back. With a firm grip on his hair, she guided his lips across her skin. Down her neck to the divots in her shoulder, in between her breasts, and then over to suckle. He teased the hardened nipple with his tongue, and she laughed. He loved the feel of her smooth belly moving beneath his hand and moved his lips to tickle the tender flesh of her hips.

He rested a moment and met her encouraging brown eyes. "Go on," she said and splayed her legs on either side of him. "Take your time. Don't be afraid."

He was anyway. He sat back, heels pressed to his buttocks, and averted his eyes from the inevitable. Instead, he stroked her right leg, as if memorizing its every feature, and admiring the difference between it and a masculine leg. Smoother, less knobby, smaller but equally hard muscles. Up her calf and to her knee, down the great expanse of thigh. He stopped and closed his eyes.

"You *are* new at this, aren't you?" Her hand covered his, comforting, and took control. Her fingers guided his to the dark thatch of hair. They pressed against large, fleshy lips to slide into a warmer, slick area. They rubbed, feeling the nub, flicking it side to side, pressing harder and harder. Nutmeg's breathing grew faster, hoarser. She urged his fingers downward, to an entrance housing the origins of her wetness. One finger slid in easily enough to feel the moist sponginess of her inner walls. He carefully probed inside, scared and fascinated at the same time. His thumb pressed down on the nub, and she gasped and let go of his hand.

Worried that he might be hurting her, he pulled his finger out. She grabbed his wrist, and he opened his eyes to see her frown. "Why did you stop?"

"I thought—" he shrugged and hung his head.

She sat up and maneuvered herself so her legs wrapped around his waist. He shuddered as she

brushed his cock with her moist nether lips.

"If it hurts, I'll let you know. It's all right." She hugged him around the neck, pressing her breasts tight against his chest. Gingerly, he clasped her shoulders, and then tighter and tighter as her body undulated against his. Female she might be, but he needed her, and needed her *now*. Little by little, he moved in time with her. Her hips slid up and down, sliding against his hardened cock, both of them straining.

And then she angled her body just right to take him inside her. He cried out as his body flushed with warmth, and they tipped over, him on his back, her on top, jerking her body up and down.

Both of them were sheened with sweat. His hands slipped as he groped at her. He chanced a look at her face, and her eyes were squeezed shut, her mouth partially open, cheeks and lips taut. She moved faster, and his whole world narrowed down to need and the wet slap of flesh against flesh.

She came before him, but only just. Her inner walls spasmed and contracted around his shaft, and it was just enough to send him over the edge. Seed rushed out of him as contractions enveloped his body. Her head tilted back, and she let out a groan of ecstasy.

When it was over, she collapsed beside him, panting. A low chuckle roused him from his languor. "You will be good for the other women, I think." She pressed her back to his, pulled a fur up over them both, and went to sleep.

He lay awake for some time, still confused. The experience had been pleasurable enough, and he'd been pleased to know that he wasn't as incapable as he'd feared. Sex with the other boys, like Yosan, had been rough and quick, nothing like the long exploration of each other's bodies Nutmeg had provided him.

His last thoughts, as he drifted off to sleep, were of how much he wished he could have that sort of time with a man.

With Niann.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Several days after his eighteenth birthday, it was cold and chilly, and Niann had slept badly. He'd been dreaming, again. *Come to me*, a voice said, over and over.

He'd risen early to find the shaman was already gone, and now stood outside, leaning on his crutch and looking toward the forest. Birds called out to each other in greeting. Niann listened, suddenly lonely. Jennar wasn't here anymore. So where was he?

A flash of mottled brown and white caught his eye as something moved in the trees.

*Come to me.* The words, leftover from the dream, echoed in his mind.

He was eighteen, now, an adult in the eyes of the tribe, no matter what status they relegated him to now that he was crippled. Being an adult gave him a scant amount of greater privilege, but it meant that he could go where he wished and not have to answer to anyone about where he'd gone.

Step by hobbled step, he made his way into the trees. Dead pine needles crunched under his feet. Sap scented the air, and here and there a magpie scolded his slow progress. He came across a few straying kala deer, brown coats specked with white in preparation for the coming winter. Niann passed the deer by, a little envious. Even if he found a white kala hide, he had no one he could give it to. As an outsider, he wouldn't be allowed to marry. He tried to console himself with the fact that the women didn't interest him anyway, but it still hurt. It was no secret what went on between men and women at night. He'd heard the noises coming from the men's tents.

Because he couldn't marry didn't mean he would never have a mate. Like the kala deer, several of the young men rutted with each other. Women had to be properly courted and married before the men were allowed to bed them, but the men had no such restrictions with each other.

His stomach clenched. He didn't want any of the other young men. Only Jennar, and Jennar was gone.

As he'd known, the trip up the mountain to the dreaming rock was hard. Slivers of shale littered the ground, and he slipped more than once. He was hungry, and tired, and thirsty, but he kept on, doggedly clutching his crutch. He managed to find a few late raspberries, bitter but edible, and a thin, cold stream trickling down from the mountain's height. Hunger and thirst were sated only momentarily; with nothing to carry water or food, he'd soon be back where he started.

The trail grew steeper, now peppered with boulders instead of smaller rocks. It took all of Niann's strength to climb, pulling himself up rock by rock. He was shivering, hardly able to

walk at all when he made it to the dreaming rock. It was a long, flat piece of pinkish granite jutting out from the side of the mountain. And windy; there was no shelter, no chance of making a fire for warmth. The climb had taken the entire day, and now the sun was making way for the moon.

Niann eased himself down, grateful to be off of his sore leg, and waited to see what would happen next.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Niann woke, sweating in the aftermath of his dream. He lay on the cold stone, dazed, trying to recall what he'd seen. He'd definitely dreamed, but there had been more to it than a simple vision of his totem animal.

He'd been blinded by an unbearably white light that moved toward him. Without looking at it directly, he had the sense that it was an animal. When he risked a glance, he could see the long, slender legs of a kala deer. A hart, by the gigantic rack of antlers.

The light's intensity faded so Niann could lie on his back and look directly up at his visitor. The deer towered over him, raised one silver hoof and brought it down on the inside of Niann's bare thigh.

It burned, though the deer was careful not to put any more weight on it than necessary. Niann cried out, and afterward, he rolled over on his side and lay panting while the pain ebbed away. The deer bent its head down and nuzzled along Niann's face and neck. *I've been waiting for you. You are mine*, the deer told him. *I have marked you as my own. Rise, yearling.*

Niann meant to protest that he could not walk without his crutch, but his body felt different. Longer. Heavier. His head weighed more, but his sight and smell had improved tremendously.

A deer. He'd become a hart, like his guide.

Gingerly, he arranged his legs beneath him and lurched to his feet, swaying as he got used to the balance. One step, and then another, and each movement became easier and more natural. To his joy, all four legs worked. He wasn't lame in this form.

*Run with me.*

Niann did, savoring the power and grace of his deer form. The Bright One jogged alongside him, whispering words of power, telling Niann the joys of having the kala deer as his totem. Leaves and branches cracked beneath their hooves. The air smelled clean and fresh, and Niann had never felt so loved or free.

They paused to drink at a stream. Some of the water trailed off to create a shallow pool still enough to see his reflection. It surprised him. In deer form, he was no longer a boy. A full rack of antlers graced his head to signal his maturity.

A new scent caught Niann's attention. He jerked his head up, and there, farther upstream, was another deer. The Bright One's nostrils flared.

*Who is he?* Niann asked.

*One who does not belong here.* The Bright One's black eyes regarded him intensely. *This is your doing. Let him go.*

Let him go? Niann didn't even know who the other deer was, only that, like Niann, he was a traveler and not a deer in his real form. Its eyes were too intelligent and knowing to be anything but human.

*Let him go*, the Bright One urged, but Niann ignored him. This wasn't his doing. He felt a strange attraction toward the other deer and strode toward it. The second deer met him halfway. Niann gave no thought to the fact that his urgings were for a male and not a female; he knew in an instant this was what he desired, someone strong and graceful and handsome. Evidently, so did the other deer. They nuzzled and head-butted each other, playful, but then the playfulness had changed to something he didn't quite recognize.

Everything after that was hazy. He remembered the other deer climbing on top of him and how it had felt, hot and frightening and wonderful. Too soon the encounter had ended, and Niann woke, sore from his climb up the mountain and falling asleep on a rock. He was back in his crippled body.

"No!" he cried, and slammed his fist on the stone. "No! Take me back!"

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There were two women in Jennar's tent tonight, Lily and her sister, Glory, both of them beautiful by any tribe's standards, with almond-colored skin and long, black hair twined with feathers and beads. They stepped into his tent, already naked, each giggling softly as they looked him over.

His body wanted them, made evident by his swelling cock, and he had to admit he'd started looking forward to having someone to keep him company at night, as well as a physical release. Still, he didn't enjoy feeling like a stud animal, but what could he do? To say no would be to risk insulting the chief and his generosity. For all that the chief was the leader, it seemed that the women made many of the decisions, including who they would bed and when.

Nutmeg had come back several times. To get him over his shyness, she said, but he soon had the feeling that she enjoyed teasing and liked making him uncomfortable. Beyond that, she actually seemed to care for him, and made sure that he had everything he needed, including food and supplies for his tent. He'd taken to carving in the evening, making animals that the children snatched up with delight when he offered them.

It had been nearly two moons, and Jennar had still not come to terms with the women coming to his tent uninvited. Their frequent visits made him more capable and skilled, yes, but their encounters lacked the spark he longed for.

And now there were two of them. He wondered how he was supposed to handle this. Nutmeg enjoyed pleasuring him, but made it clear that she expected the same in return. And he had to admit, several things he was learning would work well enough in pleasuring a man, too. He enjoyed taking his time, to revel in the person and the body beside him instead of dominating them for a few brief moments of need as Yosan had been so apt to do.

Lily knelt behind him and acted as a sort of backrest while Glory tugged at the knots of his loin wrap. Lily wrapped her arms around his chest and teased his nipples, lightly pinching them until they grew hard. Glory bent down, showing her long, smooth back and rounded buttocks, and lowered her mouth over his cock. His fingers tangled in her hair as he fought to keep her there, the warm roughness of her tongue licking the tip of his cock and down along the shaft.

From behind, Lily bent forward and pressed her lips against his. She kept her hands moving, kneading the muscles in his chest before moving up to his shoulders. Her full breasts pressed against his back. Glory lay prostrate before him. The soft, wet slit between Glory's legs invited Jenner's fingers, and his hardened cock, to explore its depths. He gently splayed her legs and found her already slick from excitement. Slowly, he massaged the nub to wet his fingers, and then brought his fingers past the usual opening and to another, tighter one. She wriggled, unused to the new sensation.

A while later, she sighed with pleasure. His fingers moved back and forth, using her fluids to moisten the area between her buttocks. She murmured something incomprehensible when he gently inserted a finger to lubricate her inside, but she made no move to draw away from his touch. Again, and again, his eyes still closed, his heart trying to convince him this was a man.

When he'd judged his companion to be prepared enough, he replaced his fingers with his erection. "It's all right," he said quietly. "Just relax." He nudged himself in with care, and she gave no indication of pain. Bit by bit he slid in, until his shaft was entirely inside and gripped by her tight muscle. He stayed there a moment and closed his eyes, finding it so easy to believe it was a man and not a woman beneath him.

He pulled almost all the way out, and thrust, gentle, at first, until his need and desire overtook his politeness. She grunted and moaned and gasped, but none of them were cries of pain. He kept going, harder, wishing that his time among this tribe was over, wishing he was with a man.

And then the world dropped away, and he was somewhere else completely.

The air was cool and scented with a dozen things he'd never smelled before. Clean, flowery, sappy, all scents he knew, but far sharper than the ones he was familiar with. His eyes, too, caught colors he hadn't known were there. The crystal blue of the air and water, the multi-hued greens of the grass and tree leaves.

He took a step forward and found he moved his arms as well as his legs, but his hands and feet were gone, replaced by the slender limbs and delicate hooves of a deer. A kala deer. Another step forward, and another, and then he surged forward, dashing through the trees and over fallen stumps at an astonishing pace. Wind rushed through his fur, and he'd never felt so powerful or



free.

He halted when he reached a stream, prancing in the cold, shallow water. Sides heaving, he bent his head down to drink, swallowing great gulps of water as if it was the best he'd ever tasted, and it was.

The crack of twigs from behind startled him, and he jerked his head up and swiveled his ears to locate the sound. There, a few paces down the stream, stood another deer, a male from the antlers jutting from his head. The brown eyes caught Jennar's, and his ears flicked forward with interest.

The hart's musky scent intrigued Jennar enough to lope forward and investigate. Once he was close enough, he sniffed the deer's face and ears, watching the fur flatten from the air coming out his nose. The hart seemed to welcome his approach, and nuzzled him. Jennar batted his head against the other deer, feeling an excitement race through his four-legged body as intense as if he'd been human.

Either by scent or gesture, the other deer picked up on his cues. They necked, ears twitching, noses snorting to pick up the scent of desire from each other. Their need grew more intense. Jennar slammed his body against the other, trying to get him into the position he wanted.

Jennar seized the chance when the hart was caught off-balance enough to swing his hindquarters around. Jennar surged forward. The weight of his body made the other deer stagger, but the other didn't fight as instinct took over and Jennar let his unfamiliar body seek the way to release his pent-up need. Beneath him, the second deer shuddered. Its head jerked skyward along with its hindquarters, making it easier for Jennar to sheathe himself inside.

Instinct, and yet, something more. Jennar's furred body trembled with exertion. He thrust, and thrust, until finally he shuddered and—

—felt himself come inside a woman. He blinked at the sudden shift between two worlds and wished desperately he was still in the deer's.

## CHAPTER NINE

The Bright One didn't answer Niann's pleas. Niann wondered if he'd done wrong in ignoring the Bright One's advice to send the other deer back, whoever he was, but he couldn't. He didn't know how or why the other deer had been there, only that Niann wanted to see him again. If only he could stay there on the rock and go back to sleep in hopes the deer would come again.

It was cold, though. Night would come soon, and he had no means of making a fire to stay warm. The breeze made gooseflesh rise on his skin. With shaky arms, he propped himself up and thought of the implications of what he'd seen. No one from the tribe had dreamed of a kala deer, not in years. Bears, eagles, rabbits, owls, bobcats, those were all commonplace symbols. Even a mouse, once, but that boy had grown to be one of the best seekers and gatherers in the tribe. The Kehani looked to many animals for their traits and determined to live their lives by them. A bear's strength, a rabbit's fleetness, the sight and stealth of an owl, the cleverness of a fox—and the sexual prowess of the kala deer, the tribe's totem animal.

Niann clasped his arms around his chest and shivered. It couldn't be true. He wasn't part of the tribe. He was an outsider, an orphan, with no idea of who his father was or where he'd come from. The tribe would never believe that he, out of all the true members, could have the god of the kala deer as his totem. The inside of his lamed leg burned. Awkwardly, he adjusted his leg and bent over to see why.

There, on his inner, upper thigh, was a burn mark in the shape of a kala deer hoof. His trembling increased. The dream had been true. No denying it now. He belonged to the kala deer.

He tried to stand, but even with the help of his crutch, he was too weak and shaky. The revelation scared him, because the kala deer engendered so much respect that to be its avatar required a strength that Niann didn't know if he had. Jennar would have been a better choice. He was strong and fast and skilled. Niann had no real talents, and he was crippled besides. He was tempted to return to the tribe and lie about his vision, but he didn't want to anger his totem any further than he already had. To deny his totem animal would be worse than accepting it.

To make things worse, there were various ceremonies to celebrate one's totem animal. The Bears fought and wrestled in a tournament, the Rabbits would race, the Foxes would play a clever game of hide-and-seek to see how long they could outwit the best searchers. No one had been a Deer that Niann knew of, so he didn't know what that ceremony entailed, but he had a fair idea. His stomach churned with fear and curiosity, and his groin burned as he remembered the physical feelings from his dream and wondered what it would be like to enjoy them while he was awake.

Resting, he tried to stand again and succeeded. The burn mark chafed as he walked, but he forced

himself to keep going and didn't stop all the way down the mountain, except for a brief pause at the stream to drink. Going down was no easier than going up. Niann slipped and slid in the shale until the skin on his legs and the palms of his hands was raw and bloody. He lacked the strength to move quietly through the wilderness, and every careless movement sent birds and rabbits fleeing.

His thoughts wavered between excitement and fear. Since he was blessed by the kala deer, and could prove it, he would be part of the tribe now, and respected. Or, and he thought this was the more likely, he'd be stoned and run out of the tribe for being an imposter.

By the time he made it to the bottom of the mountain and reached the thin, dirt trail leading back to the village, he had to lean heavily on his crutch for support.

"I wish you were here, Jennar," he said, tracing the carvings of the animals. "You wouldn't let them send me away."

Breathing hard, he set out for the shaman's tent.

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Heyka was startled to see Niann emerge from the woods after dark, limping heavily on his crutch, bloody and covered with dirt and debris. He'd been sitting outside, cross-legged, tending his own fire, wondering and worried about Niann's sudden disappearance. This time, there was no Jennar to track him down.

He jumped up to help Niann before the young man collapsed. He put his hands on Niann's upper arms to steady the man, relieved to see that Niann was safe, if not altogether sound. "What did you see?"

It took the young man a few moments to catch his breath. "The deer. I saw the kala deer."

It took effort for Heyka to keep his face still and not to show the excitement stirring within him. At last! "Come in. Quickly now, and tell me everything." They staggered inside where the shaman let him collapse on the pile of furs.

Niann lay on his side, skin ruddy with dirt and excitement. Heyka wet a few rags and used them to clean the dirt from Niann's skin. "Tell me what you saw."

"Harts. Two of them. The first was so bright I couldn't look at it. The second was white. It came to me and—" He blushed and hid his face behind his hands. "We mated. Except I wasn't me. I was a hart, too."

Another deer? That was unusual, and even more so to mate with another in the spirit world. These visions were times for the guide and his apprentice to learn from and about each other and, usually, they were alone. The shaman dug through his stores for the proper mix of ingredients and set them in a pot of water to steep. Niann laid, unmoving, eyes rapt with the memory of

what he'd seen. He rambled, with a boy's naïveté and embarrassment about sex, as he tried to make sense of what had happened in the dream, and his fear about what his initiation ceremony might entail. "That's if they let me have a ceremony. I'm an outsider. Not wanted," he said bitterly.

"They will not reject you. Not now." Not with a totem as powerful as the kala deer. Heyka poured some of his brew into a clay bowl and helped Niann to sit up. "Here. Drink," the shaman said. "In time, I will tell you what the proper ceremony is, but for now, it's better to relax. You've had a hard journey."

Niann nodded and drank, his eyes already glazed, his body swaying back and forth without awareness. Heyka caught him as he keeled over and laid Niann's head in his lap. The brown eyes were open, the pupils dilated. His chest rose and fell with steady breaths. Sometimes, if the gods felt strongly about their chosen ones, they returned from the dreaming-place with a mark of their god's favor. His own, the twin punctures of a snake's bite, rested on his leg just above his ankle. The shaman examined Niann's body, turning his head from side to side, rolling him to the side to look at his back, and saw nothing. He turned his attention to Niann's legs... and there, high on his inner thigh, was the unmistakable imprint of a kala deer hoof.

Heart quickening from excitement, Heyka threw some incense on the fire to burn. The tent filled with aromatic smoke, thick and mind-numbing unless someone, like the shaman, knew how to counter its effects. He used it rarely, because while under its influence, its victim was vulnerable to suggestion.

He told himself that it was for Niann's own good. If the rest of the tribe knew of his dream, he'd either be derided, or accosted in an attempt to get his blessing. Heyka would have to speak to the chief, and spend time preparing the boy without Niann's knowledge. He must remain ignorant until the night of his ceremony.

"You will come into your heritage two moon's hence when the moon is full. For now, your animal is the fox, shy and fast and good at hiding. Keep to yourself, and know that I will protect and care for you. Say nothing of your dream."

The boy's lips moved, but nothing came out. The shaman took that as an assent.

The tent flap opened, and the chief ducked inside. His eyes lingered on Niann's limp form. "Well?"

"Our outsider is no longer a curse, but a blessing. He has seen the deer."

"You're sure of this?"

Heyka nodded. He maneuvered Niann so the chief could see the blistered, red imprint. The chief gave a sharp intake of breath. "As chief, will it not be my honor--?"

"You will be his first," Heyka said, and smiled when he saw the chief's satisfaction. "But until

the night we hold his ceremony, he must be kept isolated from everyone else."

"I will wait," the chief said, though he looked disappointed. "Tend to him. I look forward to the day when we may welcome a holy one into our midst."

Heyka nodded, and the chief ducked back outside. The shaman stroked Niann's face. "The chief will be your first, but I alone know what powers you will have, and how to use them."

## CHAPTER TEN

Almost a year after he'd arrived at the valley tribe, Jennar's tent was empty at night more often than he had company. What he knew, and what the women were far too polite to say, was that he'd become a dull companion, though no fault of the women. They'd tried, and he'd given his best efforts so as not to disappoint them, but after he'd dreamed of the white hart, his heart just wasn't in it. He craved male companionship so much his body ached and he couldn't sleep.

The young shaman, in particular, had captured his interest. Jennar rarely saw him, and, except at the ceremony for the passing of the elder shaman, only saw him in fleeting glances. Meditating or tending to the sick were the only answers Jennar was given when he asked. "Are you ill?" Nutmeg asked him once, anxious after his inquiries. "I will send him to you if you need his services."

Since the services he had in mind weren't the ones Nutmeg did, he mumbled some excuse and went back to his carving. There were several other handsome men in the camp, several of whom *seemed* to look at him with more than interest, but he dared not ask. Every night at dinner the chief made it a point to mention how lovely the women were, and which might be seeking a companion. Never once was the possibility of male intimacy suggested, so Jennar held his tongue, afraid of causing insult.

The dreams of the deer continued, but their coupling wasn't as intense as the first night. More often than not, he found himself in deer form, but this time, his mate ran away from him rather than coming towards him. The dreams left him empty and unfulfilled, which started to reflect on his activities in the real world. He never stinted the tribe on his lessons in hunting or fletching, but he found himself making more and more excuses to go to the valley's edge near the woods where the kala deer were plentiful. He spent hours lying in the tall, fragrant grass, watching the herds, witnessing their coats turn from brown to white and back again as the seasons passed. More often than not, he found he had a companion in his vigils, a raven with a band of beads and leather tied around one ankle. Someone's pet, Jennar assumed, because it was so tame, allowing Jennar close enough to stroke it. Why it chose to follow him, he didn't know.

He was equally interested in the behavior of the deer. As far as he knew, no one in his own tribe had spent much time observing them. Most of what they knew had been handed down from elder to elder, because the mountain deer were more elusive and harder to spot. Several of the Kehani's habits mimicked the deer exactly; the females in the center with the males on the outside, protective. The strongest males obviously owned certain groups of females and fought with any younger male that attempted to steal one away. Other males, somehow aware that they wouldn't be a match for a while, rutted with each other, nostrils flared, bodies bumping into each other, the larger mounting the smaller...

Jennar turned away, face flushed, cock strengthening beneath his loincloth after witnessing one particularly lustful rut between two males. He'd been a fool to go. Need, unsated by female encounters, had been building within him for moons, and now the sensation spiked to the point of intense discomfort. He crept back to his tent, feeling too ill and feverish to join the tribe for the evening meal. He lay naked under a pile of furs and stroked his cock, rubbing abrasively in the hopes that a much-needed release would be enough to soothe his overheated body. It didn't work. Nothing brought him to climax, not using fingers to probe the internal pleasure spot, or rubbing his erection against the furs or whatever else came to hand inside the tent.

*Nothing.* Gods, he would go mad if he stayed like this.

He gave up after a while, when he was too sore and tired to do anything else. The weight of the furs was his only comfort, the closest link he had to his dreams. If he slept, maybe he could go back and chase down his dream-mate and sate himself in deer form.

Sleep refused to come with his body hard and aching as it was. Sometime in the night, Nutmeg crept in, followed by a shadow Jennar vaguely recognized as the tribe's shaman. The shaman moved with a quiet grace that hinted at the power he possessed. He wore a thin woolen robe, woven with a traditional striped pattern. The top of it hung open, the bare skin suggesting the lack of anything underneath. A pair of black feathers hung from one of his braids.

"When you did not come to eat, we worried," Nutmeg said. She crawled up beside him. Her hand made his forehead burn. "*Ei!* You're hot. I hope it isn't catching!"

"Here. Let me." The shaman gently shouldered her aside and did an examination of his own, peering into Jennar's eyes, reaching beneath the fur to feel along Jennar's neck and chest. The shaman's touch, deft and expert as it was, roused another longing in Jennar. A man's intimacy. He wanted, *needed* this, especially when the shaman's hands reached Jennar's now-painful erection. Jennar wriggled, but the shaman's exploration remained chaste as he pressed around Jennar's groin to seek anything abnormal. The coolness spread, soothing a little of the agony.

When he was done, the shaman sat back on his heels and gave Jennar a faint, sad smile. "We have done wrong by you, I think. This is not an illness of the body, but of the soul. Tell me, cousin, what have you been dreaming of?"

Jennar clamped his lips together, far too embarrassed to say what he'd truly seen. It was dishonorable to remain silent when someone as respected as the shaman had asked him a question, but he couldn't bring himself to answer.

"Ah," the shaman said, and looked amused. "Out of shame, you will not answer. It's not hard to figure out, I think. We know you've been spending a great deal of time watching our hoofed brethren. What do you see? What do you hope to find? And why do they plague your dreams so?"

Jennar rolled onto his side and started to shiver uncontrollably.

The shaman spoke to Nutmeg and nodded his head at the door. "Leave us, and see that we are not disturbed."

She nodded her assent and left, securing the door flap behind her.

"Be at ease, hunter," the shaman said as soon as she'd gone. He set a hand on the side of Jennar's face. The touch soothed instead of burning, as Nutmeg's had. "You are safe here. Safe with me. Whatever I do will be for your sake, because I wish to ease your way through this. If you become vulnerable, I will protect you. Do you understand?"

Jennar nodded, eager for something, anything, to feel better.

"If you will not tell me, then perhaps I can see for myself. Dream, Jennar," the shaman told him. "Dream."

The word had magic. In moments, Jennar was flung into the body of the hart, just as he had been in his previous dreams. He had the sense that he wasn't alone this time, that the shaman was somewhere nearby, but he couldn't see the other man. Off to the side, a raven croaked. The shaman, in the guise of his own spirit guide? Probably, but Jennar didn't have time to dwell on it. Instinct drove him down toward the river, toward the other hart he knew would be waiting.

He was there, coat glossy and white, black antlers stark against the blue sky. He tensed when he saw Jennar and stood poised to run. Jennar took one delicate step after another toward the hart, praying that this time his mate wouldn't run, yet gathering strength in his limbs should he have to give chase.

The second deer snorted and flicked his ears. Jennar paused, feeling as if his mate didn't recognize him. The hart lowered his head, swinging it forward, and took a few tentative steps toward Jennar. Jennar stood, frozen, until his mate was close enough to nuzzle. The other deer sniffed around Jennar's neck. The soft touch of his nose sent a thrill racing through Jennar's body. His fur stood on end as the second deer's nuzzling became more insistent. The pink tongue flicked out to lick the short fur around Jennar's eyes and nostrils. With his keener sense of smell, Jennar could smell the other deer's excitement, which roused Jennar further.

They necked, antlers clacking together. Jennar rubbed his body against his mate's, desperate for the touch that had so long been denied him. Jennar swung his head, butting at the deer's chest to get him to turn the direction Jennar wanted. The deer turned, exposing powerful flanks. Jennar rubbed his head around and beneath them, savoring the hard, muscled body and the musk of a deer in rut.

After so many dreams, it was easier for Jennar to ease the upper half of his body on top of the other deer's. Instinct and need guided his lengthened cock to the right place. He drove himself into the deer's body, pumping in and out, desperate for a release that had to come, or else--

Jennar woke in his own tent, sweaty and panting. The ache in his groin worsened. Unthinking,



he reached between his legs and rubbed and rubbed, but there was no release. He let out a cry of annoyance and tried again, wringing his cock between his hands, and still nothing.

The shaman watched, impassive. "Your dreams leave you hungry," he said. "The mating teases you and leaves you unfulfilled in this world. I think a piece of you belongs to him. Who is your mate in the dream?"

*Niann*, he wanted to say, but held his tongue. The thought surprised him. The boy had been on his mind a great deal lately, and for the past year Jennar wondered what Niann had seen at the dreaming-place, or if he'd even been allowed to go. For all he knew, the boy might have died from his illness. None of the infrequent messengers had mentioned him, even when Jennar asked. He didn't know if it was longing coloring the truth of his dream-mate or if it really was Niann. Reason said it couldn't be. Niann was an outsider to the Kehani. For him to see a *kala* deer in his visit to the dreaming-place, let alone appear as one in Jennar's dreams would be impossible. "I don't know."

"Who do you desire it to be?"

*Niann* he thought again, and just thinking of Niann made the throbbing in Jennar's cock worse. He couldn't tell the shaman anyway. It wasn't Niann, no matter how much Jennar wanted it to be. Uncaring of the shaman's watchful gaze, he tried again, concentrating on the head of his cock, massaging it with his thumb and forefingers. Nothing happened. He rubbed harder, more violently, until the shaman gripped his wrists through the fur to make him stop.

"Enough. You will injure yourself." The shaman pursed his lips. "Tell me who your mate is."

"I don't know!" The edge in his voice made him feel guilty.

The shaman looked at him, hard, but let the query drop. "You have a powerful friend, to be able to send you so much sexual energy through dreams. It's little wonder that you cannot pleasure yourself after such a strong dream; so much is built up within you that the exit is blocked. That, at least, I have some means of easing." He peeled the furs from Jennar's sweat-slick body. Jennar didn't have the strength to object. The shaman made him lie flat on his back, which made his rigid cock that much more obvious.

The shaman ignored it. Instead, he held both of his hands, palms down and fingers spread, a hand's breadth above Jennar's chest. He closed his eyes, the placid expression belying his intense concentration.

After a few long moments of wondering what the shaman was doing, he felt a repetitive tug inside him, like a knot unwinding thread by thread. The horrible ache lessened, and instead of feeling an intense need centered directly in his cock, it spread out, until Jennar's entire body thrummed with need. His hands craved the touch of another man, his lips the taste of another's salty skin.

Only then did the shaman open his eyes and actually touch Jennar. "Bit by bit," the younger man

said. "Little by little. Slowly." His mouth met Jennar's, and they kissed, the shaman's tongue gently reproving Jennar's more adamant one. Jennar's hands jerked up to grip the shaman's face, but the shaman pressed them down and held them, exuding a sort of energy that caused Jennar's muscles to go slack. He was at the shaman's mercy, now.

The shaman smiled. "Slowly, I said." The shaman kissed Jennar again, trailing his lips along Jennar's eyes, cheeks and mouth. Jennar sighed in pleasure, and the shaman looked at him askance. "We *have* done wrong by you. Why did you say nothing when the women came?"

"And insult the chief by refusing his wife? Or his daughters and nieces?"

"You should have said something. No offense would have been taken if they knew you preferred men."

This wasn't making Jennar feel any better. "But I never saw, or heard mention of men with other men here. Oh—oh, yes, right there," he murmured as the shaman licked his neck from shoulder to ear and rimmed Jennar's ear with his tongue.

"I think they were told to keep quiet, for risk of offending *you*. Even the chief takes a handsome young hunter to his bed now and again."

"Even the chief--?" Jennar groaned his frustration. "All these nights for nothing!"

"Not for nothing," the shaman said, suddenly distant. He used his hands again, spreading them out over Jennar's chest to tug at a new bit of tension. The shaman worked with a certain intensity, and only now did Jennar realize what he was doing—siphoning off the energy that had been building inside Jennar's body for months.

It frightened him to think what might have happened otherwise. He knew, after setting traps and pulling bow-strings, that too much tension could cause them to snap and injure their user.

The shaman worked like a master craftsman, playing the contours and sensations of Jennar's body like a carver creating a masterwork. He focused on massaging Jennar's pectorals, and teased the nipples with his fingers and tongue to draw more of the energy away from the more delicate areas. It felt good. Better than good.

After a while, the shaman rested his body atop Jennar's and asked, "Why does your god not help to ease your pain? Whom did you see at your dreaming-place?"

"The bobcat," Jennar said.

The shaman half-closed his eyes. "Your shaman may be a fool, but you cannot lie to me, Jennar."

Jennar swallowed. Whatever the shaman was doing left him feeling empty after all those moons of building energy. Without it, he felt bereft, hollow.

The shaman kissed him, and a little of the emptiness filled with a new and better energy. "Tell me what happened. This is important."

"I—I never saw anything when I went up to the dreaming-place," Jennar said. Shame flooded him. He expected a look of dismay or worse from the shaman, but the other man's face remained placid. It gave Jennar the courage to continue. "I lied to my uncle. I told him I dreamed of a bobcat, because I longed to be a hunter. I went through the ceremony, and luckily, I *was* a good hunter. But I've always felt hollow. I wondered why the spirit guides denied me while visiting everyone else."

Brown eyes searched Jennar's, reminding him of the curious gaze of a bird. "They did not come, because you were not whole. I think your deer friend, whoever he may be, took a part of you while you were young. That's why he affects you so badly, and why you are able to meet with him as his own totem animal. He pulls you to him."

Jennar turned his head away. Niann wasn't a matter for this tribe, even if it was possible that he was the other deer in the dreams.

"I will not force the truth from you, but it is harmful to keep it inside." The shaman eased himself up again and continued his ministrations. This time he focused on Jennar's legs, starting at the feet and manipulating the muscles and joints with exquisite skill. Jennar felt the tension ease as relaxation flooded his body.

This wasn't love, not even the barest hint of it. Only the shaman's pleasure and willingness to use whatever means necessary to ease his patient's suffering. When it was over, the shaman left Jennar feeling physically better than he had in moons, but inside, Jennar felt hollow, as if something was missing.

The shaman cocked his head. "I know what you wanted, but now isn't the time. It may never be. I did what needed to be done and nothing more." The look in his eyes betrayed the distance in his words. "Tell me, Jennar, next time you dream of the deer. This is a dangerous, uncontrolled bond. I am concerned about you for several reasons."

Jennar said nothing, feeling uncomfortable at the shaman's intense interest.

"Sleep, now. I will stay and watch for your dreams if they should trouble you."

Too tired and languorous to object, Jennar rolled over and went to sleep.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

The dreams continued, but Niann dared tell no one, not even the shaman. They shared furs now and slept with Niann curled up against the other man. The shaman's presence made him feel safe, almost—loved. The memories of his attraction to Jennar began to fade as the real, constant presence of the shaman replaced them.

The dreams came, and with them the other deer the Bright One had called his mate. Niann always woke feeling flushed and hot, but unfulfilled. The shaman had to have noticed his frequent erections, but said nothing, not even when waking to a sticky dampness between them for several mornings. Niann waited until Heyka went about his chores and then did his best to clean the bedding. His cheeks burned.

He still had his own chores to do. This morning he'd been sent out into the woods to gather several herbs and flowers the shaman needed for potions, feeling fortunate to have a leather bag that hung from his shoulder so he could collect what he needed and still use his crutch. Niann didn't mind fetching things for Heyka; he found a certain peace in being away from the camp and everyone there. They made him nervous.

Heyka called to him from up the hill. "Niann. Come with me."

The young man looked up, unhappy to be torn from his task. Did Heyka want this done or didn't he?

"Niann. Now." Heyka turned his back and strode off, obviously expecting to be followed.

Grumbling, Niann tied his bag shut so as not to lose any of his hard-won herbs. He limped up the hill and back toward the tent. His lame leg still pained him once in a while, but the shaman could always make it go away by massage or herbal mixture.

He knew at once something was off. Heyka stood just outside the tent, waiting, the graying locks drawn back to make his sun-worn features more severe. A woman stood next to him, someone Niann felt he should have recognized but didn't. Niann's eyes flitted from shaman to woman and back again. Every instinct told him to run. Niann halted abruptly, suddenly nervous. The part of him blessed by the fox god made him want to find safety and hide.

Heyka crooked his fingers. "It's all right, Niann. Tonight, I have something special planned for you."

He didn't know what was special about tonight other than a full moon, unless the shaman told him and he'd forgotten. The days passed in a sort of blur. There was little outside of his life

except the shaman and his herb gathering. The rest of the tribe barely existed for Niann. If anyone tried to speak to him, he blushed and ran away to hide. Even when Heyka had someone to tend to, Niann wouldn't come near until the shaman had the tent to himself again. Sometimes it meant a few nights sleeping under the stars, but Niann didn't mind. Heyka didn't want him talking to anyone anyway.

"Come, Niann. It's all right. I've made something to drink to calm you. I know you're afraid."

Niann nodded and cautiously worked his way up the remaining ground to the shaman's side, his eyes never leaving the woman. Heyka handed him a mug, and Niann drank down the bitter brew. None of the potions tasted good, but the effects afterward were worth it.

Like now. The nervousness faded, and his heart stopped pounding so hard. He even felt brave enough to smile at the woman, who gave him a faint one in return.

"Inside. Let's go." The shaman held the tent flap open, and Niann ducked inside, hopping on one leg until he could stand upright and use his crutch again. His drink must have been stronger than usual. Instead of merely feeling calm, he felt lightheaded and hardly able to stand. He sank gratefully into the furs and leaned against the shaman, who joined him.

Heyka smiled and stroked Niann's head. "Lie back and relax." Niann did as the old man asked. Someone else entered. The woman, whose deft fingers removed Niann's loin wrap before he even realized what was going on. He squirmed and tried to reach for it, because the shaman told him never to strip in front of anyone but him, but Heyka pressed his shoulders to the ground. "Easy. It's different this time."

Niann couldn't see what made it different, but after a short while he didn't care any more. He felt dizzy and hot, much like when he'd been sick.

Despite the heat, the shaman added more wood to his fire to make it even more stifling inside the tent. A few handfuls of incense went into the flames, and the place was filled with smoke. Niann could hardly breathe and he panicked, but the shaman sang to him and soon everything was all right.

The woman put her fingers in a bowl of paint and traced intricate designs on his face, chest and groin. Her fingers were calm and sure, and the cool black paint felt wonderful against his heated skin.

Niann closed his eyes and dreamed. They hadn't been so lurid and vivid since his night at the dreaming-place. White fur and musk, the sharpness of antlers, the feel of another heavy, muscled body colliding with his. Sweet black eyes peered at him from a furred face. The other deer nuzzled him, brushed up against him, making Niann frantic to allay a need he couldn't describe. He wanted to be closer to the deer, and have the deer be closer to him. They lunged at each other again and again, until Niann staggered under the weight of the other. Niann's furred, four-legged body shivered as the deer mounted him. Niann tensed, both desperate for and fearing what would come next. His world narrowed to physical sensation and the sounds of

hoarse breaths and snorts from both of them as the deer on top maneuvered himself into position and thrust—

He woke to the sound of his deer-self bleating. A chill washed over him, nearly canceling out the needy ache in his human body. He remembered. Oh, gods, he remembered, the struggle up to the dreaming-place, the visit from the kala deer, and the dream that had been far, far too real. He'd lived the past two moons in a daze and a lie; he wasn't blessed by the shy, diminutive fox god, but the kala deer...

He brought his hands to his face, but someone drew them away. Only then did he realize he was outside, in the darkness, and being carried in a hammock slung between two walking men, one in front, one behind. The shaman walked beside him, a comforting hand on his shoulder. Niann stared at the old man until he came into focus. "I remember."

"You were meant to, on this night." He squeezed Niann's shoulder. "Be brave, my boy. The moon comes, and the day turns. You are a man now, and the entire tribe will rejoice."

Niann struggled to sit up, but the shaman's firm grip kept him down. "What's going on? What's happening?" His head was heavy, and his face and throat itched from crisscrossing leather straps. Fearful, he reached up to touch his head and found a rack of antlers there. They startled him, but they felt... right.

"It's your totem ceremony. Relax. Everything will be fine."

In the distance, Niann could just make out a huge bonfire and the reddened appearances of the people on the far side of it. No one's ceremony was this elaborate. When they neared, someone started a drumbeat. The slow, methodical beat meant something serious, and it filled Niann with fear. "What's going to happen?"

"Shh. Calm down. This night is to celebrate you, holy one. Tonight, you will be raised to a symbol of our tribe, as near to godhood as any mortal might be. It will be your duty to bless the tribe and to bring it good fortune in the future."

"But—" Niann struggled again. He knew the stories of the kala deer, how in times of need one of the males would submit to his brethren. Heat flared in his groin as he thought of his dream, of being the one to offer himself to the other deer. It had felt right, and he'd been honored to do so, but the dream didn't explain what was going to happen here tonight.

He thought of the lessons the shaman had given him, the ones where the older man had discussed how a body worked and what could be done with it. He blushed, remembering the intimacy of several of those lessons, but the shaman had been careful not to touch him more than necessary. Niann believed the lessons were so he could follow the shaman as a healer, but now he realized the lessons were meant as a prelude to something very, very different.

The shaman reached for something at his side and drew forth a bladder, which he held to Niann's lips. Niann pushed it away, suddenly remembering what had happened the day he'd come down

from the dreaming-place. The shaman had given him something to drink, and he'd forgotten.  
"No. I want to remember."

The shaman smiled. "You will. This will make you more relaxed, so everything comes easier."

Niann turned his head, but the shaman grasped his chin and forced his jaws apart long enough to pour several swallows of the brew down Niann's throat. The young man coughed and spluttered. The tonic burned as it went down, but just as the shaman had said, it didn't take long for the tenseness in his body to fade. By the time his porters had carried him to the far side of the bonfire and laid him down on a bed of kala deer fur, Niann was calm, ready to accept his fate, whatever it would be.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

Everyone from the camp, young and old, was gathered to witness. Their prying, questing eyes didn't bother Niann anymore. The looks of derision they'd given him when he was younger had changed to interest and awe.

The shaman might look old, but he still had the vibrancy and abilities of a younger man. His voice rang clearly in the night. "It has been some time since this ritual," the shaman said. "I bring before you one blessed by the tribe's god, the kala deer. For proof, I offer you this."

With a flourish, he whipped off the blanket to expose Niann's nakedness. Niann closed his eyes while the shaman's hands manipulated his lower body to expose the hoof-shaped scar for all to see. There were murmurs of delight and approval throughout the crowd.

The shaman continued his speech. "It has been my honor and duty to care for the holy one these past few months until he reached his maturity, and to spend the past day at his side readying him for what is to come. Now, it is time for the last parts of our ritual, at which you will all be witnesses to the forthcoming change."

His two porters stood off to the side, next to the chief. All three were naked, except for the pair of kala deer antlers attached to the chief's head. Niann felt dizzy for a moment, recalling his dream. There had always been a deer, one older and stronger than he, but to see the suggestion of it in the chief felt... wrong.

"It is an honor to be blessed by the white hart," the shaman said, his voice loud enough to reach everyone in the crowd, "and an honor to mate with one so blessed." He gestured, and a child came forth, holding a steaming bowl. The shaman bowed as he took it and then knelt beside Niann. "You must drink all of this. It's blood from a kala deer, who laid down her life so that you may understand the part she plays in her herd."

It felt wrong, again. Never in his dream had Niann felt feminine or submissive. He'd always been male, and his love had been shared with another male. He'd given himself freely.

"Drink," the shaman said, impatient.

Niann drank. It was harsh and metallic, but he didn't dare spit it out. As he swallowed, another vision flashed before his eyes, of a female deer as strong and proud as her male counterparts, submissive, choosing to be so and taking pride in that choice.

"Now," the shaman said. He pressed his palm against Niann's eyes. "Those blessed by the white hart shall become female in mind and conduct, and it is time to trigger the change."



*Wrong*, some part of him screeched, but the ceremony was too far along for him to object. His body arched backward as he felt a strange tingling sensation alight deep inside. The drum pounded in the background, and his heart beat in time with it. Sweat sheened his skin, though the air around him was cool.

Another child stepped forward with a different bowl that smelled of sandalwood oil. The shaman knelt in front of Niann and dipped his fingers in the bowl so that his hands came out glistening. The gnarled hands stoked his face and neck, spreading the oil all along his skin. Niann let the old man rub his shoulders and chest, further relaxing him, and sparking the fire deep within his groin. His bared cock grew hard and stiff, but the shaman ignored it, too intent on oiling his body. Niann began to pant, both from the heat and from the growing feeling of pleasure. He forgot about the watchers ringed around them. The mind-numbing beat of the drum made him forget everything except for the shaman and his body's craving.

The shaman pressed his lips to Niann's, and a jolt raced through Niann's body. A thin liquid leaked from his cock. This, the shaman noticed, and whispered, "Not yet. We still have much to do tonight."

Gently, he rolled Niann over and pressed Niann face down into the sweet-smelling furs. He wetted his palms again with oil and rubbed across Niann's lower back, buttocks and legs. Niann brought his hands forward and clenched at clumps of fur, still breathing hard. The shaman's hands dug deeper, massaging the muscles in his legs.

And then... Niann smelled something sharper than the sandalwood. He gasped when he felt something wet and cool being spread between his buttocks. The shaman took his time here, too, sliding his hand up and down, lingering over and teasing the wrinkled hole there. Niann jerked from the ticklish, pleasurable sensation, but the shaman's hands pressed downward to hold him still.

One finger traced the opening, sliding in slow circles. It prodded, and then slid inside with ease. Niann gasped. He'd never felt anything like this; his body unwillingly trembled with pleasure as the shaman's finger explored inside him, wiggling from side to side, finally pushing at a spot that made Niann groan with bliss.

The finger pulled out, but was back within moments, spreading more of the cool gel. In and out, in and out, like the slow rhythm of the drum. His vision was a little blurred, but off to the side he could see the chief, eager and naked and waiting. His cock was thick and swollen with blood, and the expression on his face was one of barely-contained lust. The antlers attached to his head swayed to the drum. The two young men beside him looked equally dazed and needy.

Niann groaned again as the shaman put two and then three fingers inside of him. The pain of stretching mixed with the pleasure of feeling the fingers squirm and press against that one spot.

This time, when the shaman pulled away, there was no welcoming return. Niann rolled to his side and curled up, his entire body aching for release. His hands wandered down between his

legs to where his hard, throbbing cock waited, but the shaman reached over to pull his hands away. Niann fought, but the shaman clasped him around the wrists with surprising strength. "Not yet," the shaman said, his voice thick but kind. "There is more. Much more."

The shaman held Niann still while the chief and his two companions came to join them. They all took positions around Niann. One knelt in front, another lay on his back to the side, and the chief came up behind him. The chief clamped both hands around Niann's waist and pulled him up onto all fours. With almost brutal strength, he spread Niann's knees wide to expose him and knelt between them. Niann cried out when the chief slammed his hardened cock inside with none of the gentleness of the shaman's fingers. In the moment he opened his mouth, the first man clasped his face and slid his stiff cock inside. The second man, underneath him, now, kneaded and stroked along Niann's shaft.

His mind reeled from so much pleasurable input. Even the pain from the chief, plunging his cock in and out with the same frantic effort as he'd use to kill a grizzly bear, was soon forgotten. Niann trembled from exertion. All knowledge of things beyond his body dripped away. There was only the salty taste of the cock exploring his mouth, the pleasuring of his own shaft, which had turned from kneading into licking, the whole of it absorbed inside the second man's mouth, and the abrasive touch of the chief as that shaft slammed into him again and again. The scent of sweat and sex, the sounds of flesh slapping flesh.

Niann's body arched, the only way he could move with so many men surrounding him. His body burned, the pleasurable aches becoming unbearable. He longed to cry out, but he couldn't, not with the first man's member taking up the whole of his mouth and tickling the back of his throat. An explosion built up inside him—

—nd he spasmed as climax rocked his entire body. Everything went white in an agony that was both wonderful and horrible at the same time. Warm fluid rushed from his cock into the second man's mouth, but the man kept on sucking, just as the first kept on with his own strokes and the chief continued his. Niann lost all control of his muscles, but between the three men, they managed to keep him upright. He would have begged them to stop, to say that his body couldn't take any more, but he had the feeling they would have kept going anyway, unwilling to stop before they reached their own climaxes.

The chief came first. He howled his victory to the skies as his warm ejaculate rushed inside Niann. The other two men followed suit, coming almost simultaneously. Bitter liquid rushed down Niann's throat, threatening to choke him. Droplets leaked from his mouth. The second man writhed on the ground, lost in his own ecstasy.

And then, at last, they separated from him and let him collapse. Niann coughed and spluttered as he pawed weakly at the fur. The antlers made his head unbearably heavy. A languor settled over him, making him feel—changed. Like the deer, submitting to another of its kind, the gods had chosen him to fulfill a need for the tribe. A holy being.

Heyka was the first to see the change. With a knife, he cut the straps holding the antlers and held them high, signifying the transformation. The onlookers broke out in ululating cries, and the

drum beat changed into one more joyous. Bodies danced in the firelight. The chief and his men rose to join them, finding renewed energy in the mass of dancers.

The shaman bent down to speak quietly in Niann's ear. "You feel it, don't you, Holy One? Like the deer, you now play a woman's part."

Niann shook his head. No. He wasn't a female. This wasn't supposed to happen.

"Yes, holy one. You have transformed. Transcended, into a woman with the body of a man. A high honor."

Was it the truth? Did submission and offering himself mean he was a woman? He glanced up at Heyka's eyes. The shaman was sincere. If he said so, it must be the truth. Niann nodded.

The shaman smiled and stroked Niann's head. "Good, Holy One. I knew you would understand. The night is not yet over. There are many more who wish to be blessed by the holy one on the night of her transformation. Enjoy it. And give of yourself freely. Your spirit guide wishes it."

The shaman left. Almost immediately, there were more hands on her skin. Mouths licked and sucked at her. Cocks and fingers pried open her mouth and the entrance between her buttocks. After a while, she lost count. The remnants of the shaman's drugs made everything hazy, but she would not resist, would not tell anyone no. This was her duty to her tribe.

She would have thought it impossible, but every encounter gave her strength. Giving her body to those who needed it served to excite her more, so that she craved every encounter. Her hips thrust toward wandering hands, her mouth sought willing tongues. Men and women both came to her. Some asked her permission, others simply took what she gave.

At long last, the drumming ceased, and the sky grew light with the dawn. There was one encounter yet to be had. The shaman.

He touched her as if she was his most treasured possession. She lay quietly on the cold, dewy ground, her body still sore and aching from the night's activities, while Heyka framed her face in his hands. "I've been waiting for this," he said and kissed her.

Almost at once, the high she felt from giving herself to everyone else faded. The sudden weakness made her unable to react to the shaman's advances. "I'm sorry. I'm so tired..."

He slid his hands up to grasp her hair. "It's all right. Just relax. Bless me, Holy One," he said.

Niann closed her eyes while the shaman stroked her face and bent over to kiss her on the lips. The touch made sensation flare again in her body, but she knew she couldn't resist. The gods had created her here for this day, and for the ones following it. The shaman's lips moved down, tracing her jawbone and neck, lingering in the hollows of her shoulders. She rolled on her back to make it easier for him, and he trailed downward to suck first at one nipple and then the other. Lower still, down to the divot in her belly. His mouth found her beleaguered cock and, with

tongue and lips, coaxed it into straightening once more.

A groan escaped from Niann's lips, and she thought it unfair that the shaman should cause her body to react just when she'd reached the end of her strength. This, she wanted to enjoy, and couldn't. "I'm sorry..." she said again.

"Hush. There is nothing you need do. Let me." The shaman couldn't wait any longer. He undid his own loin wrap and positioned himself between Niann's spread legs and lifted her hips. His entry, while not so harsh as the chief's, was nonetheless sure and expert. He'd already been aroused by the proceedings; all it took was a few thrusts for him to add his seed to the rest.

The final encounter took the last of her energy. She couldn't move.

"Don't worry, Holy One. I'll take care of you." With surprising strength for an old man, Heyka lifted her. Each step was sure and energetic as he carried her inside his tent and made her comfortable amidst the piles of furs. "Drink," he said, and held a gourd of liquid to her lips. "It will give you strength."

She drank, too weak to refuse. Tears leaked from her eyes. She regretted nothing she'd done, or anything that had happened, save for one thing. The man whose touch she longed for the most wasn't there.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Jennar was outside fletching arrows when the vision overtook him. The sight of the camp faded, replaced with images of a white deer set upon by three others. *His* white deer. Finding himself in deer form, Jennar rushed at the three intruders, but no matter how hard he tried to break through to get to his mate, they blocked him with a spray of antlers.

The hart went down, surrounded and buried by the bodies of its attackers. Just beyond them stood another creature, dark and malevolent, eyes glowing. With a growing certainty, Jennar knew this was the thing that had brought the attackers to his mate.

Bleating, Jennar raced toward it, head lowered, aiming his antlers at the dark beast. But when he *should* have speared the creature, it had moved off to the left. Jennar swerved his head in the new direction and headed toward it.

Again, it moved. And again, and again, every time Jennar should have come into contact with it. Even more maddening, he couldn't quite see what the dark creature was. Bird? Wolf? Bear? It seemed to be all sizes and none, fully formed and then nothing but a pair of glowing eyes.

Jennar bleated and pawed the ground in frustration. Nearby, the three large deer still overpowered Jennar's mate. The younger hart thrashed on the ground. One of his attackers rose on hind legs and brought its forelegs down hard to snap the black antlers clean from the young deer's skull. The victimized deer let out a cry of pain and terror that sounded more human than cervine.

Jennar rushed toward them again, but the dark creature blocked his path. Dust and dirt churned around his hooves as he rushed back and forth in an attempt to go around or over, only to find it impossible. The darkness spread to obscure his vision of his mate.

The last sight of his mate was of a trembling, pathetic creature sprawled on the ground. Blood covered his head and scored his flanks. He lay unmoving, as if resigned to his fate. Jennar bleated again and again, praying that his mate would be able to hear, and fight. He was so intent on his mate that he didn't notice the darkness move and creep up around him. Before Jennar could act, the darkness reached out and gripped him. Deer-Jennar shrieked as cold streamed through his skin, numbing, deadening...

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"Jennar!"

Someone slapped him. His frozen face burned from the impact.

"Jennar. Come back. Be with me."

The calm voice of the shaman roused him. He opened sticky eyes to find himself inside his tent with the young shaman bending over him and cradling Jennar's head in his lap. The shaman stroked Jennar's cheek with the back of his hand.

Jennar's teeth chattered. "I'm cold."

"I know. But mere blankets will not help with this kind of chill." The shaman's pointed face looked grave. "Now, I think you must tell me the truth. Who is the other deer in your dream?"

His mouth was so dry he could hardly speak. "Niann," he said, and explained his relationship with the boy.

"When does he come of age?" he asked, and when Jennar hesitated, "Tell me. Now."

It was hard to do the calculations of the seasons and days in his head, but he managed, realizing the date with a sinking heart. "Two moons ago."

"You should have told me." The words were few, but the shaman's eyes flashed in annoyance. "Now it is too late."

"I didn't even know if he was alive!" Jennar protested. Why couldn't the shaman understand? "My uncle sent me away from him because he thought I was in love with the boy. An outsider."

"Are you in love with him?"

"I care for him a great deal. I have since he was born. But the lust a man can feel for another? He's a child! I couldn't do such a thing."

"He's a child no longer. He needs you." The shaman studied Jennar. "I fear your friend is in grave danger. The deer is a powerful totem and gives its powers only to a chosen few. There are others who are attracted to such power, and will take it at any cost. The deer's greatest strength, and weakness, is its capacity for physical love. What we are dealing with is a dark magic. Old. A means of using another to bring profit to an individual or group. Your friend is a vessel for the transference of energy, the strongest of which is gotten through sex."

"An evil gift," Jennar said. His fingers and toes tingled, but now he could wiggle them.

The shaman shrugged. "A gift with many uses, good and bad. He truly does have the power to give blessings to others, and both parties gain from his gifts. But he is vulnerable; what he gains through his blessings is easily taken by those who would have it. His gift will be crippled and warped by the darkness."

"The Kehani shaman. Heyka." Jennar shook his head. Gods, why hadn't he listened to his gut?

Heyka had shown a strange interest in Niann where none had before. And Jennar had left Niann with him alone for a *year*. "My totem isn't the deer. So why--?"

"You are sensitive. I am a healer; I often spend my own energy to benefit others. You, on the other hand, absorb the energies of those around you, especially the one you've bonded with. As the first to give Niann love, so you remain linked. And, now that the darkness has touched you, I believe you will be aware of it always until it is eradicated."

Jennar shivered. He never wanted to touch that awfulness again, but if he tried, he could feel it at the edge of his mind, cold and malevolent. "I have to go to him." Shivering, Jennar gathered the fur around his shoulders and sat up. It was as far as he could get; when he tried to stand he collapsed back down into the furs. He lay on his side, helpless, and used his eyes to plead with the shaman.

A sudden chill seized his body as the darkness overtook him again. He panicked and flailed, but he could see nothing, feel nothing beside the dark emptiness. And he was cold, so cold...

Then, the warmth of a body next to his, arms tight around his chest. The shaman's voice reached him as if from a distance. "Come back to me, Jennar. The dreams have left you weak with want and fear. There must be balance." The shaman waited to speak further until Jennar had roused enough to give the shaman his full attention. "Take my gift, so you will know there is a light to resist the darkness."

The shaman unlaced his woven robe and let it pool around his waist. The loin wrap followed, and he sat naked before Jennar. He was gorgeous, with dark skin and fine, detailed muscles that Jennar would love to have studied for a carving. His cock, not yet erect, rested on his thigh. Except for his head, the shaman's entire body was smooth and hairless.

Jennar hardly thought; he grasped the shaman's face and pulled the younger man atop him. This time, the shaman didn't resist but yielded to whatever Jennar wanted and needed.

The shaman smelled of all the things Jennar loved. The thick pines, the freshness after a rain, the damp earth that urged new things to grow. His mouth tasted of just-picked raspberries. He *needed* the shaman's touch, needed the feel of someone safe and warm and whole against him. It wasn't so much the need for sex as to be skin to skin with someone with the shaman's powers, to take away the chill, abrasive darkness. He grasped hard and met firm muscle. A knee thrust his aside and their hardened cocks met, rubbing and finding mutual pleasure. Pressure built within him, but it wasn't enough. He had to be closer to the shaman, closer than this.

In a rush, Jennar felt himself lifted *up* and *out*. He was no longer in his body, but—flying? Below, with vision far sharper than he should have had, he could see the tents of the Deshani camp with a few people moving here and there. A rabbit on the edge of camp eyed a pile of freshly-gathered tubers. A few blades of grass rustled as a mouse ran between them.

A raven flew beside him. The shaman, from the familiar touch. *See, Jennar?* it said without words. *Up here is the light. I show you this so that you may remember.*

He reveled in it, the feeling of lightness and crisp, cool air brushing against his—wings? He craned his head around, trying to figure out what he was. Brown wings, not black, like the shaman's. Why not? If he could meet Niann in equal form, why not this shaman? What *was* he?

*Wrong.* He knew it. Despite the shaman's comforting presence, he shouldn't be here. Panic overcame him and he began to fall. Natural instinct refused to take over. His wings crumpled and he couldn't figure out how to work them. Being a ground-bound deer was easier, more natural, but this—

A very inhuman cry ripped from his throat as he plunged toward the earth.



## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

"Jennar! *Jennar!*"

A voice dimly reached his ears, and hands pressed down against his thrashing limbs.

"Jennar, come back to me!"

The plea was followed by a surge of heat and energy that brought Jennar back to himself with a jolt. He opened his eyes to feel his heart pounding, but he was back in his own flesh. His very needy flesh.

"Good. Just lie there and rest a few moments." The shaman lay half on top of him, brown eyes radiating concern. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have done that. You weren't ready."

"What—what did you do?" The shaman's nearness brought back the physical ache of their unfinished coupling.

"Magic. Such as it is." The shaman eased himself up. "I gave you a glimpse of the upper world where the spirit guides reside."

"No wonder I fell," Jennar said bitterly. "I don't deserve to be near them."

"Why?"

"I lied to you. About more than being a Bobcat. When Niann was hurt, and I found him, he begged me to take him to the dreaming-place. He said the deer had called to him. I believed him, but I feared for his life. He was feverish and wounded in my arms. I took him to the shaman." His throat clenched. "I *gave* him to the shaman. I've failed the gods twice. You shouldn't bother with me."

"It is not my place to judge you, only to heal you as much as I may. What do you need, Jennar?"

Jennar could think of a dozen things. *I need Niann. I need him safe and whole. I need him as a man.* He shivered as he looked at the shaman's passive face, felt need flare as he tried not to stare at the shaman's nakedness. Shame coursed through him as he trembled. The cold darkness still lingered at the edge of his mind, and alongside it the feeling of falling.

And then shame gave way to rage, at himself for failing, at the gods for denying him. He wasn't cold anymore. A long, ululating cry ripped from his throat. The shaman touched him, probably meaning reassurance, but Jennar's self-containment broke.

They grappled, Jennar needing the reassurance of his physical strength while the shaman resisted. Jennar lunged, meaning to force the shaman backward, but the shaman twisted out of the way and grabbed Jennar from behind. The shaman's life had been given over to spiritual matters, but he was still physically fit and was nearly a match in strength for Jennar.

Nearly. Jennar unwrapped the shaman's arms from his neck and flung the shaman down. The placid expression surprised Jennar; no hint of the rage or bestiality Jennar felt within himself, only a calm exterior. For a moment, Jennar hated it, and despised the shaman for knowing him better than he knew himself. Dimly, he knew that the shaman didn't deserve this, but the desire to have a target for his fury overtook his good sense. Every time the shaman squirmed away, Jennar pulled him back. Every resistance brought a greater exertion from Jennar.

Rage made him careless. Now, instead of landing his blows, he hit the piles of fur. If a strike came close, the shaman deflected it with a swift move of his own. Even wrestling proved useless. The more wearied Jennar became, the more skilled the shaman. Too soon, it was Jennar lying face down in the furs, the shaman straddling his back with a painful grip on one arm.

"Enough," the shaman said, and with that one quiet word all enmity drained from Jennar's body, leaving him with a hollow, hopeless feeling.

"I failed him. I failed my people."

"You hurt yourself, wishing for things to be undone. Your ego gets in the way of your spirit. What is, is. Do not lose yourself to the darkness of living in the past."

"There is no light. I've lost Niann."

"There is, but it is buried. Let me help you find it." The shaman's weight shifted. He leaned forward, long hair tickling Jennar's shoulders and back, and kissed Jennar on the cheek.

*Not Niann*, his mind told him, but it didn't matter. He needed to touch, to *be* touched, and the shaman was there for him.

The shaman slid his body down so he lay on top of Jennar, knees on either side of the hunter's hips, erection rubbing comfortably between Jennar's legs.

Jennar whimpered. It hadn't been like this with the women. He'd been nervous with them for some time, but he'd never felt vulnerable. It was as if the shaman had stripped him bare to the soul and left him exposed for the world to see.

Yet every touch was soothing, healing, a balm to salve his spiritual wounds.

A chance look at the shaman's face told Jennar he was something, *someone* else. His eyes rolled back to show only the whites. His muscles bunched and his dark hair flowed around him in a way that made it seem as if it had a life of its own, fluttering like the feathers on a raven's wing.

It was strange, but not frightening. Jennar had never felt so safe and secure.

Or more at peace. Fingers probed at his body, slipping inside his mouth, tracing his eyes and ears, and Jennar had the oddest feeling that he was being remade from the inside out. Hands squeezed and rubbed and pulled along his neck and shoulders. Lips sucked a trail down his spine as the shaman edged backward. Jennar tangled his fingers in the fur bedding as a minor convulsion wracked his body. This continual buildup of sexual energy was almost worse than that caused by his dreams, because the shaman was here, teasing him, working every inch of his body until it screamed for release.

The exploratory hands found his buttocks and the places between. Jennar raised his behind to meet them. His cock was so hard it hurt, yet the shaman touched him there anyway, thumb lingering at the tip to swirl itself in the liquid gathered there. The shaman's tongue teased him, tickling around the outside of his nether entrance before plunging inside.

Jennar groaned, but couldn't move. His entire body was a block of energy. The world narrowed to a pinpoint of harsh, rapid breaths and the agony of a delayed release. As badly as Jennar wanted to come before his body exploded, the shaman wouldn't let him.

Nails dug into his shoulders like a cat, or a bird, hanging on to its mate. Jennar braced himself, expecting pain as when Yosan mounted him, but there was nothing of the sort, only a minor discomfort as the shaman eased himself inside.

Together they moved until Jennar felt a crack grow within him, racing along as it would on ice until the ice split entirely apart. Blinding white light overtook Jennar's senses. The only thing left to him was his body as waves of pleasure crested over and through him. Both men were so attuned to each other that their voices rose in unison, twin cries of a victorious release.

As the shaman's ejaculate filled him, so did a sense of peace. Guilt and fear drifted away in the haze of bliss. They lay spooned together after that, dozing. It was a long time before Jennar could think clearly, and longer still until he could rise on one elbow to look at the shaman. He looked more human than spirit now, his eyes glazed with the satiation of sex and power. "What's your name?" Jennar asked.

"Aspen." The shaman sat up, seemingly less affected by the encounter than Jennar. His eyes darted to one of the corners of the tent, and he grabbed one of the carvings before Jennar could stop him. He cupped it in his hands while a look of wonder stole across his face. "There is power in this."

Jennar shivered. He'd thought so, too, but dismissed it as an artist's connection to his work.

"There is," the shaman insisted. "Tell me what you do while you carve. What do you feel?"

"It's—I don't know. The animal's spirit calls to me as I carve. I set it free." He'd never felt at such a loss for words, especially with the look of amusement on the shaman's face. "What do you mean, it has power?"

"It is an irony, isn't it, that you are capable of seeing into other worlds, and yet, when you went to your dreaming place, you saw nothing."

Jennar opened his mouth to protest, then realized the futility.

"You will go back to the dreaming-place, of course."

No. The idea filled him with fear. "Niann needs me. You said so yourself."

The shaman's eyes narrowed. "So he does. But he needs you whole."

"But..." It didn't make sense. The shaman had just opened up a new place within him that left Jennar strong and confident. It should be enough.

The shaman shook his head. "You cannot help him, as you are. I told you what you must do. Niann will wait, must wait, until you have found your own path."

Jennar turned away. He'd chosen his own path years ago when he'd been alone on the dreaming-rock.

"Look at me, Jennar."

He looked, unable to ignore the hardness in the shaman's voice.

"You are not whole. I can show you the light within yourself, but I cannot retrieve the missing piece of your soul. Niann holds it and uses it to bring you to him. He must return it to you, and willingly." The shaman tossed Jennar's clothes to him. "Go home. Go to your lover. I have given you what strength I have. There is nothing else I can do for you here." With that, Aspen pulled his robe over his shoulders and left the tent.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

It

wasn't yet midmorning before a man came seeking Niann's blessing. She'd barely gotten settled in her tent, a brand-new one all her own, before the man ducked inside and stripped before she could even greet him properly. He knelt on the furs before her and grasped her face. His tongue probed hers.

The touch, so sudden and unexpected, caught Niann unprepared. The man grunted as he tried to ease Niann backward onto his lap. His hardened cock probed between Niann's legs, searching for the entrance he knew was there. "Bless me, Holy One," the man said. "I need—"

"Not yet," Niann said and wriggled out of his grip. Fortunately, the shaman had stocked her tent with containers of oil and grease. Niann grabbed a handful of the latter and took her time slathering it generously on the man's cock. He was impatient; large hands kept trying and trying to turn her around, but she refused to cooperate.

Freely given—on one condition.

At last, he realized what she was doing, and dipped his fingers into the lube. They found their way around her waist and between her buttocks. Ungentle fingers probed inside, jerking back and forth to ready her as fast as possible. The touch, instead of being frightening, was now welcoming. She understood the man's need and relaxed so that he might take his pleasure from her.

As soon as she yielded, the man turned her around to mount her. Niann whimpered as the man's cock slipped in at last. It still hurt after last night, but she couldn't expect the man to take that as an excuse. Niann had a duty to perform. Already, she could feel the strength they both gained from the contact. He was a Badger—gruff and straightforward. Determined; his body thrust into hers with a single-mindedness that astonished her.

Power flooded through her body. Pain fled, and she was aware of nothing else, only the pressure of the cock within her and how every thrust created more and more energy between them. She was nothing; her body was nothing, only a vessel to hold and transmit the power brought on by a union such as this.

The man cried out and grasped her around the chest as orgasm hit them both at the same time for a final exchange of power.

Afterward, he continued to hold her, breathing hard. When he could speak, he said, "Thank you, Holy One." He struggled into his clothes and left.

She wasn't tired. Instead, she felt more vital, and eager for her next blessing. It came soon. A woman stepped timidly into her tent and knelt on the furs before Niann.

"Bless me, Holy One. I—I—" she stuttered, and fell silent. Her brown eyes pleaded with Niann to understand what she could not say.

Nervous, then. Niann eased up beside her, slowly, so as not to frighten her. Niann clasped the woman's face and turned it to kiss her cheek and then her neck. Quail, Niann realized, gifted with raising children—except she had none. That was her shame and her desire for a blessing. She wanted children.

Niann continued to kiss the woman while unlacing the leather shirt. A pair of smooth, round breasts emerged. These, Niann fondled, tracing the areolas with her thumbs until the nipples stood erect and firm. Her lips trailed down the expanse of skin between the woman's breasts, down to the belly that craved a life it hadn't been given. Niann lingered there, teasing the dimple with her tongue, focusing the building power *there*.

Gently, Niann eased the leather pants down over the woman's hips and legs. Beautiful but shy, the woman drew her body together as tightly as possible. Her arms locked around her knees. She wouldn't look at Niann.

Niann crept behind her and pressed her body to the woman's to let the woman get used to the touch. Instinct guided Niann's hands to calm and relax and soothe. Eventually, the woman leaned back against Niann and let her legs spread. Niann curled one arm around the woman's chest, beneath her breasts, while her free hand continued to explore.

The woman flinched when Niann stroked the soft, moist area between her thighs. In a flash of panic, she clenched the arm holding her steady. Niann didn't stop. A moment or two more and Niann *knew* the woman's history and the cause of her fear just as if she'd spoken it aloud. She'd given herself over to a dozen men and let them do whatever they wished in the hopes of becoming pregnant. She'd let herself be hurt, but nothing worked.

Niann kissed her and murmured sweet things into her ear. Eventually, the woman lost a little of her fear. The delicate flesh moistened and grew slick as her mind gave in to what her body craved. Niann let her sink down until she lay supine on the furs with her knees raised. Slowly, always keeping tactile contact, Niann crept around until she knelt between the woman's legs.

The stroking continued until the woman's hips rocked forward to meet Niann's hands. Niann's cock was erect, her groin aching with need, but she'd ignored it for the sake of the woman, until now. She eased her body forward and into the woman's. The woman's fear returned, but Niann stayed gentle and firm until she relaxed.

Close as they were, Niann could sense the woman's quail totem. Silently, Niann begged for the quail god's assistance in helping the woman. The Quail answered with gratitude. *I couldn't do this alone. Not with her. She was wounded, but no longer.*

Niann opened herself to whatever power the quail would offer, and, together, they directed it at the woman. A glance at her face showed the woman finally relaxed and unafraid, ecstatic as the power from both her totem and Niann rushed through her. Niann continued to thrust until the woman's body spasmed around her cock, and, a moment later, Niann felt her seed release.

The Quail's presence faded. Niann sat back, but the woman could only lie there, face rapt and slick with tears. The fear, at last, had left her, and she cried from a joy and release she'd so long been denied. Eventually, Niann helped her sit up and dress. No words passed between them. Eventually, she was able to stand and leave.

Niann knew there were more people waiting outside to see her. Flushed with exuberance and success from helping the woman, she was ready. They came in a steady stream, some only for a chaste kiss and a chance to be alone and unobserved with the Holy One, others with a more serious dilemma. Niann helped them all without complaining. All that she was, freely given.

At the end of the night, the shaman came to bring her dinner. "You look well," he said, and kissed her.

Heat raced through Niann's body. Despite doing fifteen blessings that day, she still felt like she could do a dozen more. She leaned into the shaman's touch, oddly happy that someone's attention was focused on her and not on themselves. A selfish thought, but one that didn't go away.

"Bless me, Holy One," the shaman said. Huskiness clouded his voice. She leaned forward to kiss him, to taste the strong presence of the snake that was his totem spirit.

He was neither more nor less gentle than any of the others she'd welcomed into her tent, but he was far more thorough and focused on her. "Does your leg pain you?"

It hadn't, not until he mentioned it, and then the familiar old ache made her wince. She nodded. The shaman spread oil on his palm and slicked her leg to give it an expert massage. This time, he didn't stop at her thigh. His hands slipped inwards to clasp her cock. He started at the base and squeezed as he pulled upward, over and over. Eventually, his mouth replaced his hands. Little waves of pleasure rushed through her body.

After what she'd learned today, the shaman's treatment should have added to her store of energy, but it didn't. With every touch she felt more and more tired, so that by the time the shaman rolled her over and entered her from the rear, she could barely rouse the interest to give him what he wanted. The feel of his cock sliding inside her felt good—she was just too tired to enjoy it.

When he was done, a crippling exhaustion stole over her. She felt utterly drained and unable to move. The shaman stroked her face with the back of his hand and then helped her sit upright while he held a bowl of liquid to her lips. "Drink, so you'll have your strength back in the morning. There are many more who wish to ask for your blessing."

Her lips parted, and the shaman tilted the bowl to let the drink slide down her throat. It tasted

foul, but she didn't have the strength to protest.

"Sleep," the shaman said, and took the empty bowl away. He laid her down on her side and then pressed his naked body against hers. Exhausted and uneasy, she slept, and had no dreams of deer.



## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

It became routine to have Heyka rouse her and give her a breakfast of seed cakes and whatever tonic he decided to mix for her. She ate and drank without question, trusting in the shaman's knowledge of animal totems and spiritual matters.

After only two weeks, her duties started to wear on her. Every morning, there were at least a dozen waiting for her blessing. In the afternoon, a dozen more. Some were timid, asking for only a chaste kiss; others, like Yosan, came every day and took whatever they could.

Freely given, the shaman had told her. Even if it meant Yosan wrestling her to the ground and ramming his dry cock inside if she couldn't get to the lube fast enough. He always found some reason to need a blessing. "I need to hunt well today," or, "I need luck with a woman tonight," or some other paltry reason.

Whatever energy Niann managed to gather during the day disappeared as soon as the shaman came for his visit. He looked her over and frowned. "You're not as unselfish as you should be," the shaman said one night as he held her limp in his arms. "You shouldn't be this tired!"

"But—"

"You must work harder and be more generous, and then the Bright One will bless you with his strength."

She replayed the day over and over in her head. Was there ever a moment she'd hesitated, or felt some sort of regret or anger at what she was doing? She had to admit, she had. She'd given everything up for the tribe and had nothing to call her own.

*Freely given.* She kept that mantra in her head, but it didn't rid her of all her doubts.

She didn't dream. At least, not with the clarity she used to have. Her dreams had no images, but felt lurid and unsettling, as if someone was using her body without her awareness. She awoke in the mornings feeling as though she hadn't slept at all. After her first blessing, she would feel more awake and alert, and almost back to normal after her second, but it never lasted. As soon as she saw Heyka, she could already feel her body weaken, and everything would repeat itself.

He always came into her tent whether she was ready for him or not, and brought with him numerous potions. One night he brought a bowl of hot venison stew to eat. She ate the stew, craving the salt. She felt good. Better, in fact, than she would have believed.

The shaman held out another bowl. "Drink. To keep up your strength."

"But—" Niann frowned. "I don't need it right now. I feel fine."

With his thumb, Heyka wiped a drop of broth from Niann's lips. Niann shuddered, inevitably aroused by his touch. "I'm your shaman and your friend. I know better. What you feel now is only temporary. Drink for me, Holy One."

Niann shook her head. "No. I don't want to."

With a movement as quick as his snake totem, he grasped her around her chest, situating her so he could spread her jaws open with one hand. "Drink," he said, voice harsh. "Do not make me force you again."

She had no choice but to accept as he poured the bitter brew into her mouth. It didn't make her feel strong. Instead, she was lightheaded and dizzy.

The shaman didn't seem to notice. The bowl dropped to his side as his hands traveled up and down her chest, eliciting the familiar fire in her belly. "Bless me, Holy One."

The words. She couldn't deny them, no matter who asked. Her body and her power, belonged to anyone who asked. This was what the Bright One had chosen her for, and she accepted it.

She'd given up everything she was for the sake of the tribe. As the shaman continued his intimate exploration of her body, she wondered if there would be anything left of her at all, or if she would be used up completely.

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Soon. Heyka could feel the energy growing inside him every night as he took Niann for his own. All the lives Niann touched were the shaman's now. He could feel his own skin itching like that of a snake about to shed.

Hopefully, it wouldn't be only his skin shedding, but his entire existence in the mortal world.

He looked at Niann, unconscious in the sleep of the drugged. She was easier to manipulate this way, although such ill-treatment plagued the shaman's conscience. He'd spent nearly all his life helping others, aiding them in searches to heal their bodies and souls. And now, one unwitting boy had changed everything.

Niann *was* beautiful. The slightly foreign twist to her features hinted at the exotic and unknown, which had always tempted the shaman. She was pretty enough to be the female she was purported to be. Heyka had chosen a few lovers over the years since his first encounter with a Holy One, but none had stirred him as much as Niann. Heyka knew he was becoming addicted to her. The worst part was waiting nearby during the day, watching people go in and out of Niann's tent, and knowing he had to share his Niann with anyone else who asked. *His* Niann, as he thought of her now. His shoulder and skin and cock, which he now fondled as Niann slept.

His power, his means to shedding the dullness of the life he knew and transcending to the plane of existence that he knew was meant for him.

Niann twitched in her sleep. A low moan escaped her lips. The shaman kissed her, and continued to massage her cock until she quieted.

Outside the tent, the camp stirred with the sounds of the usual early morning preparations. And then--voices called out, shouting warnings to a stranger who'd arrived. Heyka listened over Niann's light breaths.

The chief's voice called out in greeting, barely masking his dismay. "Jennar! You've returned!"

*Jennar.* The shaman's hand clenched tight around Niann's shoulder. Not now, not when he was this close to using Niann to get what he'd been waiting forty years for.

No one would ruin his chance, not even if he had to kill to keep his ambition intact.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Jennar hadn't known what sort of greeting to expect, but it wasn't this. His uncle looked disappointed rather than overjoyed to see him, but the lapse was quickly erased by an expression of pleasant surprise.

"Come, Jennar! Welcome back! We'll have a feast tonight in your honor, but first you must seek the blessing from our disciple of the kala deer."

His uncle, wearing a cruel look of triumph, led him over to a tent painted with deer. The flap was open. Jennar felt a sense of dread as he neared it. He knew who waited inside, but he didn't want their reunion to be so public. Heyka stood outside the tent and watched Jennar with an inscrutable gaze. Jennar shivered, remembering his vision of darkness. This shaman was dangerous in a way he hadn't been before, and it had everything to do with Niann.

The chief strode up to Heyka and said, "My nephew seeks a blessing from the Holy One."

Again, that raking gaze from the shaman. Heyka had changed in the past year. He was cold and imperious when he looked at Jennar, without even a hint of the kindness that had kept him a well-liked and respected shaman. Jennar did his best to look unaffected. "He may enter," Heyka said, and turned away.

Jennar ducked his head and entered, then froze at the sight. There, sitting naked in a pile of furs, was Niann, as beautiful and perfect as Jennar had always hoped he would be, except for the thin, twisted leg he curled beneath him in an attempt to hide his lameness. The crutch Jennar had made for him leaned against the far wall of the tent.

His loin wrap grew uncomfortably tight. Gods. He wanted Niann. He'd always wanted Niann, but not like this, not when Niann was forced to offer himself to anyone who asked. Aspen's warnings all flooded through his head at once. The greatest was that the gift of the deer allowed Niann to put people in touch with their totem animals and draw from their strengths. Physical contact worked best; the greater the intimacy, the greater the communion with the totem animal.

Which meant that Jennar couldn't touch Niann, no matter how much he desired to if he wanted to keep his secret. Niann would know in an instant that he lacked a totem animal.

Shock showed on Niann's face. "Jennar." The poise of his posture fled, and he once again looked like the frightened boy Jennar had rescued from the crevice. He regained his composure quickly and held out his arm. "Come. Quickly. Or those outside will think I'm denying my god by shirking my duties." Niann sidled up to him and reached for Jennar's loincloth. "Don't be afraid. Some of them are, but I've learned to make it easier. For all of us." His voice was filled

with resignation... and pain.

"No." Jennar backed away and held up his hands to ward off Niann's advance. "Just seeing you is blessing enough for me. You're grown and you're healthy," he said with a nod at Niann's injured leg, "and you're beautiful." He meant it. He wanted nothing more than to put his dreams to the test, to feel Niann's soft and supple body beneath his.

But not like this. Niann was willing enough, already made obvious by the strengthening organ between his legs. A matching need flared in Jennar's groin, but he couldn't touch Niann. Not now. Not ever, unless he followed the young shaman's instructions, but he didn't know when that might be. Niann's situation was worse than he'd thought. How could he possibly leave the young man here, defenseless, to go up the mountain and do something he should have done right the first time?

"I didn't expect this," Niann said quietly, reading Jennar's dismay. "I wasn't even born part of the tribe, and now..." He gestured weakly at all the fine things inside his tent. "I'm the symbol for the tribe, more highly regarded than either the shaman or the chief. Everyone comes to me for blessings. I'm never alone."

"It's not right," Jennar said. "The gods can't ask this of you."

"But they have. This is what I am. I was born for this."

"You weren't born to be used."

"I'm not used. What I give, I give freely." Niann shook his head. "The first night, everyone came. Men, women, starting with the chief and ending with the shaman. I didn't mind. It's what I was meant to do. But I wanted—" his voice caught, and he had to take several long breaths before he could speak. "I wanted you. Out of everyone, I wanted you the most."

Jennar felt something inside him break. Was it true? Did Niann really want Jennar, or was it that piece of Jennar's soul he still held that influenced him?

"I don't know why, but—" Niann's hands gestured uselessly as he struggled to find words.

"When you carried me out of that crevice, it was like I already knew you, even though I didn't. It *felt* right to be with you. Comfortable. I know you didn't feel it, but I did."

"Niann, I—" Gods. Should he tell Niann the truth? He obviously didn't remember the part Jennar played when he was an infant. Would it hurt, or help? "There's something you should—"

Niann interrupted him. "Please, Jennar. I've waited for this. You don't know how long. Please."

Jennar pressed himself as tight against the wall as he could. Niann's face slowly changed from hope to the look of someone who had the sole reason for his life taken away. Jennar felt terrible. "I can't. Not like this. Just listen. I have to tell you that—"

He cursed inwardly at his stupidity when he saw Niann's face fall. The younger man withdrew, obviously hurt. "Don't. I couldn't stand hearing you speak the truth. I know what it is. I knew you never wanted me, just like you don't want me now. I'm just a poor orphan. An outsider. You pitied me, or else why would you leave me all the carvings, and the crutch?"

"That's not what I—"

"I didn't need your pity then, and I don't need it now. Understand me?"

"Niann, please listen—"

They both raised an arm to cover their eyes when the tent flap opened. "Holy One?" It was the shaman's voice. "We heard raised voices. Has this one angered you?"

Jennar lowered his arm to see the shaman's glare. He'd never seen that expression on the old man's face, as if Jennar was a small child mishandling something of great value.

"He has refused my blessing," Niann said, voice cold. His stiff, formal posture had returned. "He is not allowed back inside my tent without my permission."

"As you wish, Holy One."

Jennar crawled out of the tent, but spared one last glance back inside before the flap closed. The harsh expression had faded, and Niann once again looked lost and helpless.

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Jennar hadn't been in the solitude of his own tent for long before his uncle found him. The chief hadn't changed in the past year, except to add a few more silver hairs to his black. "I am disappointed in you, Jennar. Heyka tells me you've angered our Holy One."

Jennar busied himself unpacking his saddle bags. The carving tools he laid out on a piece of leather alongside some of the smaller carvings he'd done. "Perhaps I did, but I only spoke the truth in my heart. How could the gods ask something of him like this?"

His uncle looked horrified. "*She* is a gift of the gods. It was made clear in her vision that this was her destiny."

"But, Uncle," Jennar said, equally disturbed by the use of the "wrong" gender, "I spent much of my time among the valley people watching the kala deer. Not once did I see any deer so frequently... mounted, and certainly not by all the members of the herd!" Several of the carvings were of kala deer, all of them strong and proud.

The chief waved a hand in dismissal. "Those were valley deer, not at all the same as ours. The habits of the mountain deer are well-known. When there aren't enough females to go around, a

male deer is turned for the good of the herd."

"It's not true! There's always plenty of females, and the submissive male isn't 'turned.' He's still as masculine as the one that mounts him."

His uncle wasn't listening. The chief turned his back, ready to leave.

Jennar pressed on. "And what good is Niann to our tribe? Blessings become common and useless when they're offered too much. He's being used up. Can't you see that he's sick? Do you even look at him as a person any more, or only as an offering from the gods?"

The tent resounded with a crack. Jennar fell backward, scattering the carvings, his face stinging from the impact of his uncle's hand.

"I thought that being among the valley people would make a man of you, and that your services there would bring honor to us. I was wrong. They filled your head and heart with nonsense and turned you against our beliefs." He loomed over his nephew. "Have you been blind these past years? Have you not seen the decay that had fallen amongst our tribe? Crops and herds were failing. Babies were born sickly. Now, with a true Holy One in our midst, our fortunes are changing. Can't you feel it?"

Jennar resisted the urge to rub his cheek. "The only thing I *feel*, Uncle, is anger at the way Niann has been used."

Jennar flinched as his uncle raised a hand again as if to strike, but he did not look away. The chief's face held a look of fury that Jennar had never seen. If he was younger, Jennar would have been terrified, but now that he was a man, Jennar could look at his uncle and see him only as another man, and one with something to lose.

The chief lowered his hand and shook his head. "I will have the shaman speak with you, for surely there is some foul taint that has befallen you and turned you against us."

Jennar's heart fluttered as he thought of Aspen's warnings. Drugs. Like the ones he gave Niann to keep him passive. It wasn't the god's work at all, but that of one greedy man.

"He's already asked after you. He's concerned as well. You've changed, and not for the better. Go to him. Let him help you cleanse the bitterness from your heart."

"But, Uncle—"

He raised a hand at the protest. "No more. I have spoken. I will have your word of honor that you will not interfere with our shaman or his treatment of our Holy One, or I will ensure you leave and never come back. Heyka is wise in the ways of holy ones and knows the best ways to care for ours."

The words tasted bitter on Jennar's tongue. "As you wish, Uncle. I will not interfere with the

shaman or his care of the Holy One." Satisfied, his uncle left. Jennar righted his carvings, putting the largest of his deer in a circle of protection around the smallest.



## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

As the days passed, the camp started receiving a steady influx of pilgrims who'd heard about the Holy One's presence and came seeking her. There was a continuous stream of people at Niann's tent. Jennar never saw him, let alone got a chance to speak with him privately. The result of their conversation gnawed at him. He hadn't meant for it to go so wrong.

Aspen's urgency faded as other worries grew. What did it matter now if he knew what his totem animal was? Besides, Jennar couldn't bring himself to let Niann out of his sight, though he knew there was almost nothing he could do. If he could only get Niann alone for a short time, then maybe he'd be able to talk some sense into the man. Maybe, if Jennar told Niann his feelings, and the truth about Niann's upbringing, Niann would change his mind.

Each pilgrim brought with them various gifts in exchange for the Holy One's services: ivory combs, intricate woolen blankets, silver jewelry, gems, anything the visiting tribe could think of to offer in exchange for the blessing of the holy one. These Heyka carefully gathered and set aside before admitting anyone to Niann's tent. As far as Jennar knew, Niann never saw the gifts, let alone had a chance to make use of them.

Jennar refused to think of Niann as female. He wasn't, not a bit of him. Neither were the kala deer that "turned" for the good of the tribe. In the mountain tribe, the females *were* submissive, out of habit, but Jennar had learned far differently during his time with the valley tribe. Those women were daunting because of the confidence they had in themselves and their eagerness to teach him the pleasures of the night.

Niann rarely left his tent, and when he did, was always accompanied by Heyka. They ate their meals outside, during which Jennar could see Niann looking more and more wan. The shaman increased his number of daily potions. One to soothe Niann's nerves, another to relax his body, another to give him strength, another to sleep.

When Niann finally slept, it was always with Heyka at his side, their limbs tangled together so Jennar couldn't extract one without waking the other. He'd dared to peek inside the tent once, late at night, and been repulsed at what he saw. Heyka's hand caressed Niann's nakedness in a manner utterly possessive.

Only once during his vigil did Jennar get a chance to speak with Niann alone. The young man had risen to relieve himself a fair distance away from the tent. Jennar followed, noticing how pale and wraith-like Niann looked in the moonlight. For one bizarre moment, he looked white and furred, with round, pained black eyes.

Jennar blinked, and it was only Niann holding his cock and then tucking it back into his loin wrap. He stood for a long time, lost in thought. A cool breeze came, and he chafed his bare arms.

Blanket in hand, Jennar strode up and wrapped it around Niann's shoulders before the younger man could protest. Jennar held Niann tight against him and leaned close to speak softly. "Stay. I would have a few words with you."

"You have refused my blessing. I should not speak with you at all," Niann said, but the words were flat and rote.

The dazed, glassy look in Niann's eyes made Jennar's heart pound with fear and anger. He was no longer a creature of choice; the shaman had taken it from him with the potions and long explanations of a Holy One's proper behavior, and Niann believed all of it.

Niann hissed when Jennar squeezed too tight. Guiltily, Jennar drew back a corner of the blanket to see a dark bruise on Niann's shoulder. Not all of his blessings went smoothly. Some of his more eager devotees actually hurt him, but Niann would say nothing of the pain, or show anything other than his benevolence. "This has to stop, Niann."

"What are you talking about?"

"These 'blessings.'" Jennar shook him, wishing Niann's fogged brain was so easy to clear. "Don't you see? The tribe treats you no better than they did before. You're still little more than a slave, pulling off your loincloth at the first sign of a man in need of a rut."

He stared at Jennar, utterly confused. "The gods chose me for this. It's my duty to bless the men, and even the women if they need me. I've helped them." He made a weak gesture toward the women's fires. "Three of the women there couldn't have children, or the ones they bore were sickly and died early. Their next children will be born healthy. I *helped* them. The tribe needs me."

Niann's explanations made Jennar's head spin. "Tell me this. If you're female—how could you 'help' the women have children?"

"I—" Niann started, then shook his head. "It was the gods' will. They're not my children, but those of the gods."

He believed it. He *really* believed it impossible that he could have fathered children by being intimate with a woman. "They lied to you. The gods wouldn't use you like this. I spent several seasons watching the kala deer. The submissive male isn't used by every member of the herd. It bonds with one deer. One, do you hear me?"

Niann shook his head. "I'm not a literal interpretation, but a metaphoric one. Everyone may choose to portray the deer I love."

"The shaman is filling your head with nonsense." He was taking a risk, speaking against the shaman. Niann was obviously devoted to the shaman, and would hardly believe anything against his guardian. "Look at him. Who is gaining from your visits to the other tribes? Where are the gifts they give you? Certainly not on your shoulders or you wouldn't be cold tonight."

"Heyka accepts the gifts in my name, because having them would distract me from my true purpose."

"*Niann!*" Jennar shook him again, careful to keep the blanket between them. Niann winced as he hit another bruise, but he didn't care. "Listen to yourself. The gods did not choose you to become another man's means to a fortune, and yet, that's what you are. Heyka doesn't care about you, but what you do. Why does he give you all those potions?"

"To keep me strong, and calm, and to help me sleep."

"Do they help? Really? When was the last time you felt strong enough to walk farther than the edge of your tent? When did you last feel the joy of the wind on your face or the sun on your skin? You may be the Holy One, but you are hardly more than a spirit walking the earth." Jennar folded the blanket inward to rest his palm above Niann's heart. It beat weakly, not strong as it should for someone of Niann's youth. "Your soul is dead."

A single tear slid down Niann's cheek, sparkling in the moonlight. "I haven't had any dreams, Jennar. My god has abandoned me. I've done everything he asked, but I'm not serving him well enough."

"That's not true. I think he can't reach you. Fight the shaman. Don't drink his potions."

Niann rested his head against Jennar's shoulder. "He will make me. I've tried, because they taste awful and they make me feel like retching, but he will force me if he must." He sighed and turned to press his blanketed chest against Jennar's. Niann's hips thrust forward, and Jennar could feel the hardened cock probing his own. "Take my blessing," Niann said. He'd closed his eyes and tilted his head so his lips were close to Jennar's. Too close.

Jennar shuddered as his own cock hardened in response and protested against the tight restraints of his loin wrap. It would be easy, so easy, to take Niann then and there, to press his supple, young body to the ground and slide between his legs and finally know the joy of what it was like to know every fold and crevice in him.

But Jennar would not take Niann like this, soul-dead and unreachable by the kala deer god, and certainly not when he couldn't trust Niann not to sense his secret. With effort, Jennar pushed him to arm's length and held him there. He waited until Niann looked him in the eye to speak. "Not until you've become what the god truly meant you to be." He couldn't tell if Niann understood or not. "Come away with me. Please. Leave Heyka. You don't understand—"

Furious, Niann shoved him away. "No. You're the one that doesn't understand. This is my duty. Heyka is helping me to fulfill it. And don't you dare try to take me away. I'll fight you." He

balled his fists for emphasis.

And then a shout split the air. "Niann! Come back, now, or you'll be exhausted come morning."

"Fight him," Jennar murmured as Niann trotted obediently back to his guardian, who stood outside the tent looking around for Niann.

Jennar ducked into the shadows of his own tent where he was still close enough to see them, little more than silhouettes against the whiteness of Niann's tent. Voices carried through the clear air. "Look what you've done to yourself, Holy One. Let me help."

Heyka pulled at Niann's loin wrap and freed Niann's erection. The shaman knelt down to envelop the entirety of Niann's shaft in his mouth. One hand kneaded the base while the other pried apart Niann's legs to reach the entrance between his buttocks. His fingers searched Niann there, relentless and probing.

"Fight," Jennar whispered, but Niann showed no signs of doing so. The look on his face was rapt rather than angry or dismayed. Gods, how Jennar wanted to interfere, to stop the shaman's abuse of power, but he dared not. Heyka was a strong, influential man, not to mention the devotee of a powerful totem animal, and if Jennar openly interfered, the shaman would be fully within his rights to send Jennar home. Then there would be no one looking out for Niann's interests at all.

Heyka's fingers drove faster, deeper. Niann's body spasmed and he crumpled against the shaman when he reached climax. His anguished cry cut to Jennar's heart, so like the child wailing when Jennar had been forced to leave him behind.

The cry turned into a sob, which seemed to surprise the shaman. The old man reached to his waist and loosed a bladder, which he held to Niann's lips. "Drink. It will ease your mind and help you sleep."

To Jennar's joy, Niann gripped Heyka's arm and forced it away. Drops of liquid shone as they splattered over the shaman's face and chest.

"What are you doing? Drink!"

They rolled on the ground. Niann should have been stronger and quicker, but too many of the potions had made his limbs sluggish and slow. It wasn't long before the shaman pinned him down, knees on his arms, and held the draught to his lips. Niann coughed and spluttered, but Heyka didn't stop until the entire bladder was empty.

Jennar's fingers clawed at the dirt. This wasn't right. No reason, no excuse was enough to treat Niann so. If only he dared—

But after Aspen's warnings and his uncle's threat, he dared not confront the shaman directly. If Heyka wanted Niann as badly as Jennar did, there was no telling what he would do to keep his

Holy One.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

Jennar continued to watch Niann's tent, waiting and hoping for the chance that he could catch Niann alone again. Worry and exhaustion plagued him. Five days after he'd spoken to Niann, Jennar fell asleep and started awake to feel one hand covering his mouth and another at his throat. Instinct made him struggle, but a heavy body pinning him down made it useless.

"Shh," Heyka said, his silhouette barely visible against the backdrop of open sky and stars. "You have not come to see me, Jennar. I'm disappointed in you."

Jennar fought down panic. What would Heyka do to him? Drug him, as he did Niann? Murder him?

The shaman's voice was low and sensual, and if Jennar hadn't known of the danger he would have been taken in by words alone. "I know what you've been thinking, Jennar. I've seen your desire when you look at the Holy One. Why, I wonder, won't you let her touch you? Is it because you're not capable?" Jennar shivered as the shaman's hand left his throat and grabbed his crotch for emphasis. It was nothing like Aspen's. This one was rough, powerful, uncomfortable, and yet his body responded. Heyka chuckled. "Ah. Not incapable at all, I see. Why, then? Would she sense something you don't want her to know? Are you keeping a secret from me, Jennar?"

The shaman's touch burned, as if fire burned within him. Jennar dug his heels into the ground. Heyka didn't mean for Jennar to answer, only to let Jennar know he knew. He *knew*.

"You're no cat. This I know. You're a shame to the tribe. If you would have come to me, perhaps I could have helped, but now..." He shrugged. "You're a disappointment to your uncle, Jennar. It would break his heart if I told him your little secret. How long do you think you'd be a part of the tribe then?" The hand over Jennar's crotch started to rub. Jennar whimpered, tasting the bitter sweat of the shaman's hand. "I know you want her, and will do anything, even lie to your tribe, to stay near her."

The continued use of feminine for Niann's sex made Jennar angry. Niann wasn't a woman and never had been.

Heyka's hand twitched, and Jennar felt a new sensation on his belly. Cold and smooth, the sensation moved, and Jennar fought down panic as he saw what it was. A snake. The light of the moon shone on the bands coloring the snake's scales. Red stripe touched yellow. Poisonous. Jennar froze, not even daring to breathe.

"What shall it be, Jennar? Will you stay away from her, or will I have to resort to a less pleasant

means of enforcing your distance?" The snake moved, slithering up Jennar's chest. He could see its eyes, black beads glinting in the moonlight. Slowly, the shaman removed the hand across Jennar's mouth. "What do you say, false hunter?"

Neither of them moved. The night breeze tickled Jennar's bare skin. Out of air, he took a slow, careful breath. If he agreed, he might lose Niann forever. If he said no—the snake's wavering head told him what the response to that answer would be. A strike to the neck, and he would be dead within a few hours with no one to question the chance attack of a snake in the dark. He lost either way. "I agree. I will not approach Niann again."

"Good. And I will keep your secret. For now. Do not force my hand, Jennar, or I will tell your uncle your secret, and then where will you be? An outcast. Exiled for both your lies and your unfitness to be a member of the tribe." His next words were hard and malevolent. "That's if you live long enough to leave the tribe."

The snake slipped off his chest and disappeared into the shadows. Heyka followed, apparently satisfied that Jennar would keep to his agreement.

Out in the darkness, a raven called, but Jennar found no comfort in knowing that Aspen or his messenger kept watch. He'd failed.

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Heyka was late tonight. When he entered Niann's tent, he looked grim and troubled. He settled himself beside Niann and pulled her to him, holding her tight and stroking her hair. She let him, since he was so obviously upset.

"You won't leave me. Never leave me," he told her.

"I won't. I told you that." Niann shuddered as the shaman caressed her cock. She couldn't imagine a life outside this one, now. The shaman had become her world, and she strived to please him as much as she did her totem. She thought of Jennar and wished she hadn't. She'd loved him, once, or thought she did.

"You say that, but I don't believe you." His lips found her ear, her cheek, her lips. Hands stroked her flat chest and stomach. "The hunter. Jennar. He seeks to divert you from your chosen path. He fills your head with lies, because he wants you for himself. He would take you away from this good work you do."

"I love my work," she said, and meant it. She enjoyed helping those in the tribe, to bring them closer to their totem spirits so they could lead a more fulfilling life. If only she wasn't so *tired*.

"The tribe needs you, more than you know." His nose buried itself in her hair. His next words came out hoarse and muffled. "I need you."

The words chilled her. "I belong to everyone, not one man alone." No matter how much she wished it wasn't true. Jennar... she longed to be with him, despite the cruel things he'd said to her.

"Then you understand about Jennar." He laid her down on her back and piled a large fur under her hips to raise them. "I can stop him from taking you, you know."

She closed her eyes, both dreading and anticipating what would happen next. Goose pimples raised on her arms when she felt the familiar touch between her legs, the fingers slicked with grease. He teased her, alternating between tickling her balls and inserting a finger or two to press against her internal pleasure point. Her hips rose to meet him.

"I am your guardian, Holy One. It is my duty to do whatever must be done to keep you from harm." He bent over her. Hands locked around her wrists and spread them wide above her head. He wasn't gentle when he entered her and began to thrust. Her entire body rocked back and forth on the furs, and in the awkward position, she couldn't help herself. Her head lolled to the side, and she saw what the shaman meant by his threat. A snake curled up against the wall of her tent. Red, yellow and black scales shone in the firelight.

Heyka noticed her gaze. "That is my gift to Jennar if he bothers you again."

All pleasure went out of the encounter. She felt the drain, as usual, but now she felt more pain than pleasure. Her hands went numb from the weight of the shaman's body leaning on her wrists and her back ached from the unnatural position.

"There's no need to hurt him. Please. I'll stay." The inside of the tent blurred as tears leaked from her eyes. "I'll do as you ask. Everything I am is given freely."

He didn't answer until he'd spent himself and left her too weak to move. He left her splayed, hips still raised on the fur, and lay down so he could whisper directly into her ear. "I know what's best for you, Holy One." With his thumb, he wiped the tears from her cheeks. "Rest now, so you will be ready for your blessings in the morning."

She lay awake long after he'd gone to sleep, feeling the slow death of hope inside her. She could never have Jennar.

*Please, Bright One. Please keep him safe.*



## CHAPTER TWENTY

More than hope died inside her that night. So did her stamina. Each blessing left her progressively weaker so that the shaman had to stay at her side almost constantly and dose her with potion after potion. None of them really helped anymore, save to keep her mind and emotions numb.

To her relief, the blessings grew fewer, but the amount paid for them increased. A man would now pay several blankets or many handfuls of fine beads to come to her for a blessing. The shaman collected everything for safekeeping, he said. She didn't feel it was right to take so much from the people, not when it was the god himself that had declared that she offer herself to her tribe, but the shaman insisted it was right, and so she did as he insisted. She didn't dare to cross him, for fear of his retaliation on Jennar.

Jennar's words were often in her head when she was coherent enough to think of them. *Fight him*. She wanted to, but how? The shaman had a greater strength than she, and every time she protested, he would find another, stronger brew to give her and tell her she must do the god's bidding.

She missed the dreams. Her god hadn't come to visit her in a very long time, not since the days following the ceremony. Now, she was almost afraid to sleep. Her dreams, now bloody and violent where once they had been peaceful and fulfilling, left her exhausted.

Never did she let her fatigue show when someone asked for her blessing. Her lame leg ached terribly, and the shaman spent far too much time massaging it. Still, no matter how exhausted, how sickened she felt, she was acutely aware of how much the people believed in and needed her. She would not disappoint them.

She could hear them, though, afterward, talking in low voices just outside her tent. "The Holy One seems ill. Perhaps our own shaman could—"

"No. Thank you," Heyka said. "I have the Holy One's care well in hand. There is no need for concern."

Others were gentle, as if they could see and sense how frail she felt, and she was grateful. For some, touching her face and receiving a kiss as their blessing was enough. As the days wore on, Niann began to pray for more and more of the simple blessings, because soon, the shaman had to pile furs behind her so she could remain upright because she lacked the strength to sit up and do the blessings properly. Those she blessed looked uneasy, even guilty for asking. She didn't want that. It didn't do either of them any good.

Heyka came to her, late at night, as he usually did. After he'd eased her to the ground, he oiled his hands and ran them across her bare back and buttocks. She was too weak to protest. Despite all the blessings she'd given out that day, the shaman's touch still had the power to rouse her.

Only now, she didn't want it.

"Stop. Please," she said.

Heyka gave a low chuckle. "Don't be silly. You need your massage to help you sleep." His hands found her rounded buttocks and slipped between them. One finger slipped inside and she squirmed. The oil stung. "Hush now," he said, voice angry. "I'm making sure you're not hurt and that you'll be fit for blessings tomorrow."

That wasn't what he was doing. His finger probed inside her, pressing against that point of ecstasy. No longer was it a pleasure. "That's enough. Leave me alone." Her groin throbbed with an unwanted arousal.

He narrowed his eyes. "I know what's best for you. Hold still. I'll get something to help you relax and make you strong for the morning."

"No. Not anymore. I won't drink any more of your potions."

"I know what's good for you, Holy One." Another finger followed the first. Niann whimpered. The shaman's free hand clamped tight around her mouth. "You will not disobey me."

He loosed his fingers and pulled her upright so she was pressed against his chest. The shaman reached for a nearby bladder and held it to her lips. When she refused, he grabbed her jaw and pried it open. Bitter, salty liquid trailed down her throat. She coughed, but the shaman didn't stop until the bladder was empty.

This potion, one of Heyka's favorites, fogged her mind and made it difficult to think. Her limbs wouldn't obey. Speaking was impossible.

There was nothing she could do as the shaman dropped his loincloth and held her upright over his lap. Niann shuddered as Heyka eased her down over his slick, hardened cock. He knew just how to angle himself so he pressed against that internal pleasure spot, over and over. For Niann, the enjoyment of such an act had long since fled, but her body reacted separately from her mind.

Her climax was weak, but there. A thin trickle of seed leaked from her cock. With his fingers, the shaman gathered what fluid he could and held it to his lips. "Thank you for your blessing, Holy One." And then, one by one, the shaman licked his fingers clean.

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"He's dying," Jennar told his uncle. He'd managed to get a private audience with the chief inside the chief's tent, but it wasn't going nearly as well as he'd hoped. "Heyka is using him."

"Heyka is a skilled and experienced shaman, and I will not have you talking ill of him because you are jealous."

"Jealous? Uncle, I care for Niann a great deal, but I do not mention Heyka's mistreatment because I am jealous. It's the simple truth. I've watched day after day while Niann grows weaker under his care instead of better."

"You watch when you should be making yourself useful! What have you done since you've returned other than be a lazy man with no care for his fellows? Have you gone hunting once, or provided your own food? Have you done anything other than carve your little trinkets while playing the voyeur? I am ashamed of you, Nephew."

Jennar refused to give in. "I will hunt. I will earn my keep, if only you will speak to Heyka—"

"I will do no such thing!" The chief's face contorted into rage. "No more of this. Make yourself useful, or leave. There will be no more discussion of the shaman's care of the Holy One. Ask me again and you will be banished from your people."

Body tense with anger, Jennar had to take a few deep breaths before he could answer. "As you wish, Uncle." He rose and walked stiffly out of the tent. Niann was dying, and all Jennar could do was stand by and watch the shaman kill him.

A few of the visiting tribesmen lingered nearby, muttering about how ill and fragile Niann looked, and how Heyka refused their offers of help. Jennar did what he could to fuel the gossip, hoping to incite a rebellion for Niann's sake, but nothing happened. The visitors did nothing and left later that afternoon.

Despite Aspen's advice, Jennar felt as though he couldn't leave the camp, on the off chance that he would miss his only opportunity to spirit Niann away. He'd tried one night when the shaman was called away to tend a sick Kehani. Jennar, heart thudding in anticipation, had snuck up to the tent—only to be met by a hissing coral snake just outside the flap. Heyka had left a guardian in his place.

He settled for kneeling a fair way away from the tent flap and calling to Niann. "Fight him, Niann. Please. He's stealing your energy and using you to get to the upper world. Don't let him." He picked up a handful of dirt and let it go. "I'm here with you. Forever and always. You're the mate I want, just as in the dreams."

The dreams hadn't come in a long time. Jennar didn't know whether it was something Aspen had done to cut the link between them, or if it was something in the potions Niann was forced to drink.

The snake hissed and rose. The moonlight made it look ghostly until Jennar realized that the opaque look was from the snake's skin being nearly ready to shed. Jennar backed away, eyes never leaving the creature, until he was a safe distance away.

A raven croaked, shrill and urgent.

"There's nothing I can do!" Jennar told it. "I can't get to him. I can't save him."

The bird called again.

"I know what you want me to do. Go back up the mountain, but I won't leave him. What if he dies while I'm gone? What if I miss my one chance to help him? I can't take the risk."

He listened, but the bird didn't speak again.

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Inside the tent, Niann shivered. Jennar's voice alone was enough to arouse her. She wanted him. Always had, but she was afraid for him.

And now that Jennar's warning started to sink in, she was terrified for herself.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Tonight, Heyka thought. It would have to be tonight. Niann's strength was failing, and that meddling Jennar... he'd tried to interfere yet again. The snake guardian had relayed as much. Heyka had been collecting energy for several moons now. The feel of it made him light and edgy, and it had been a trial to keep up the appearance of normalcy when he went among the tribe. The energy within him sang to be let out, but he refused it. Not yet. Not until he was certain he'd gathered enough.

Niann feigned sleep when the shaman entered her tent. Still beautiful with her eyes closed and her lithe limbs curled tight to her chest. Heyka hated what he would have to do to her. Such a shame, but it was his destiny to be one with those in the upper world.

"Bless me, Holy One, but first I have something for you to keep you strong." Would she fight him tonight? A tremor ran through her body as Heyka rolled her over and tucked an arm behind her head. She wouldn't look at him, but she was too physically weak to fight him. The draught he held to her lips was one of his favorites because it clouded the mind and left the drinker less apt to resist.

She curled her lips inward and clamped them tightly against the bowl.

"Now, now, Holy One. I know best. Drink for me."

Her head rocked from side to side and finally came to rest on its side. Gritting his teeth, Heyka twisted her up and around so her back was against his chest and he could force her jaws to part with one hand. "Drink!"

Every muscle in her body tensed as he poured the liquid into her mouth. She coughed and choked but couldn't spit all of it out. Enough got down her throat to be effective. He'd mixed it extra-strong tonight, knowing what he would have to do. He needed Niann's full cooperation.

He held her tight to him, one hand covering the left side of her chest, waiting until the pounding of her heart slowed and her head lolled against his shoulder. Good.

"What are you doing?" Heyka asked. Niann gave him no response. Her body was limp against his. Heyka's touch brought no awareness and no physical reaction.

Fear lodged in his stomach. Was he too late? Had he drained her too much already?

He opened his awareness toward her... and felt a resistance that had not been there before. She'd believed Jennar's words and was doing her best to block Heyka.

"You cannot resist me," Heyka told her. Niann's breathing quickened, as did the pulse beneath Heyka's fingers. Good. She was afraid. "I will show you what a liar Jennar is, and how you will answer to me. Only me."

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She felt it, this time, now that she was no longer distracted by the shaman's voice and touch. His energy reached out to hers, to capture it for his own. With all her strength, she resisted him. Let him do as he would to her body, but let him fail. This time, she would not give in. Heyka would not escape to the upper world with the spirits.

His touch undid her, as it always had. He'd never been gentle after she'd become the Holy One, but tonight, his fingers were rougher and more urgent, tearing at her as if he was desperate to free something in her. "Give in, Niann. Give in." The taste of him against her mouth was bitter enough to nauseate her. "You are mine. I will have you. All of you, tonight."

He would wear her down, she knew. Too late to stop him. She should have listened to Jennar when he'd first come to see her. She should have *known*, but she'd been wooed by her position, by the need to tend to her people and do as her god wished.

Her god... she shuddered as Heyka mounted her. Her mind seethed with revulsion as he pumped within her. She latched onto the feeling as the only defense she had left against Heyka's brutal treatment. What kind of a god could ask this of her?

Another drink went down her throat. A few moments later, her body flushed with unbearable heat. The shaman entered her again, and again, and with each climax she felt weaker than the time before, yet Heyka persisted.

The final time, it was worse. Not only was his cock inside her, but so was his mind. She arched back and opened her mouth in a wordless cry of pain. Heyka pried at everything, her memories, her feelings, everything that made her Niann and took them for his own, draining every last bit of energy from her in order to get what he needed. Her soul shattered into a thousand pieces from the shaman's sheer force. His mind wrapped around hers as a snake wrapped around a branch, squeezing until she had nothing left to give.

Whatever she had left was enough. She felt it, his moment of triumph as he twisted all of his stored and stolen energy to transform. The tent shone with a bright light, as if someone had thrown an herb into the fire to make the flames jump momentarily higher. Then it dimmed, and the tent was empty, save for Niann.

But for her, there was nothing left to hold on to. *Jennar*, she thought. *Forgive me*. She fell, and fell, and couldn't find her way back.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Jennar saw the tent brighten, flaring with a light like a shooting star, then immediately dim. He wasn't the only one who'd seen. The camp echoed with cries of surprise, and several people, including his uncle, headed straight for the shaman's tent.

By sheer luck, Jennar was the first one inside, but he knew he was too late when he got there. The shaman was gone. Niann's body was still, his eyes open and glazed.

"Niann!" He breathed, still. Tiny, shallow breaths, but it was enough to let Jennar know he was alive. "Niann," he repeated, and sank down to the ground beside the holy one. A light touch did nothing to rouse Niann. Neither did a rougher one when Jennar, frustrated, half-lifted him from the ground and shook him. "Niann, please!"

The chief ducked inside and looked around, face stricken with disbelief. "What have you done to our Holy One?"

"I didn't!" Niann laid there, eyes wide, naked limbs splayed and covered in blood and bruises. Jennar grabbed a fur blanket and covered him up to the shoulders, not wanting to see the damage the shaman had done because Jennar had waited too long, been too late...

The chief grabbed Jennar's wrist. "What have you done? Where is Heyka?"

"I don't *know*. Let me go. He needs me!"

"He needs the shaman, whom you have evidently done away with!" His face was furious. "I would never have believed any kin of mine could be a murderer!"

Jennar stared at his uncle. This wasn't possible. "I didn't!"

The chief dragged Jennar outside and shoved him toward two men waiting nearby. "Bind him. See that he does not leave the camp. Find Heyka. Alive or dead, he must be found. Our Holy One is dying." He said the last with a glare at Jennar.

The two men forced Jennar to the ground. One twisted Jennar's arms behind his back and bound his wrists with a hemp rope, the other did the same for his ankles. "Uncle, please! You don't understand! Heyka wasn't trying to protect him. He *used* him!"

A crack to his face knocked Jennar to the ground on his side. "You are no kin of mine. Liar and manipulator. Heyka told me about you, how many times you tried to steal away the Holy One and what you planned to do with her. He told me he feared for his life. My own nephew, the

boy I trained..." The chief trailed off, a hint of grief in his voice. "I know you didn't see a bobcat when you went to the dreaming-place. Heyka told me. I wanted to believe it had been a mistake. Why did you lie, Jennar? Was it because you were taken by a malevolent spirit instead? Did it force you?"

That's what his uncle wanted to hear, that this whole situation could be excused by exorcising the damaging spirit from his body. To say yes would be to acknowledge Heyka's innocence, to admit that he'd had Niann and the tribe's best interests at heart instead of his own.

To say no... would it do any good? Only to his conscience, Jennar decided. Niann was dying. There was no shaman nearby to help. Jennar thought of Aspen, but Aspen was over a week's ride away in the Deshani camp. There was no way for him to get here soon enough.

"Answer me, Jennar. What did you truly see at the dreaming-place?"

The truth was the only thing he had left. "Nothing, Uncle. I lied because I saw nothing and I was ashamed."

"He *has* been taken," the chief decided. He nodded at Jennar's captors. "Take him to his tent. Let no one see or speak to him until he is cleansed. We must find Heyka."

The two men carried him slung between them and deposited him face down in his tent. They didn't untie him.

He didn't have his own totem spirit, so he prayed to Niann's. "Please, Bright One. For Niann's sake, get Aspen. Send him here soon."

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From its perch in a nearby pine, the raven watched the confusion and anger as tribesmen went in and out of Niann's tent. He'd been watching the events for days, eavesdropping on Jennar's conversations and standing by, helpless, as Niann grew weaker and weaker.

Like Jennar, he'd been able to do little, especially since he knew that the snake was not one of Heyka's familiars, but the snake god himself staying nearby to assist in Heyka's transformation. If Jennar would have gone up the mountain as he'd been told, this could have been avoided. Jennar's gifts would have given him the ability to discern the truth.

It could not be helped. A shaman could only dispense advice and knowledge, not force others to act on it. The raven croaked and clacked its beak. A *good* shaman, anyway. One who hadn't lost his way.

The raven looked on as voices rose and the chief accused Jennar of murder. They tied him and took him away and went to search for Heyka. A few women hurried into the tent carrying water and bandages. Besides Heyka, no one in this tribe had felt the call to be a healer or shaman. No one else knew what to do for Niann.



When at last everyone had left Niann's tent, the raven landed on the ground and walked inside. He cocked his head to stare at the young man. A moment later, a man, not a raven, knelt at Niann's side, entirely unconcerned about his nakedness. Shape-changing did not include clothing, which Aspen had come to accept.

He drew back the blanket covering Niann. Despite the objectivity he wished to keep, Aspen winced. Violence toward another was not unknown, but it was rare within one's own tribe. The women had done an adequate job with their poultices and bandages, but there was more that could be done to make Niann comfortable. Luck was with Aspen, since Niann's tent already housed various herbs and unguents prepared by Heyka. Healing Niann's body would take time, but at least he had the supplies on hand to do it.

Far worse was the damage that couldn't be seen with an ordinary eye. Soul-shattered, but not beyond healing. It would take many trips into the spirit world to find the pieces, and even then Aspen knew he might not be able to find them all. The most important thing was the shallow rise and fall of the chest and the weak but steady heart beating beneath Aspen's palm. As long as the body lived, the soul would have a place to return to.

Two shards remained, both pieces that Heyka could not destroy. The first was one that Niann should never have had, the piece that belonged to Jennar. The second, Niann's love for Jennar, burned brightly within him, a golden beacon calling the rest of the soul home.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

"Are you truly mad, as the chief believes?"

The quiet voice startled Jennar awake. He lay on his side inside his own tent, sore from having his arms bound behind him. A familiar, welcome figure squatted at his side. "Aspen. You came."

"I came," the shaman agreed. He held something long and shimmery in his hand.

"Niann. Please, they made me leave him—"

"I have been to see him," Aspen said. "He will not die, but too much of anything is dangerous. His body is tainted with the drugs your shaman gave him. They will take time to clear, and it will not be easy. I have the skill to help with that. But you," the shaman said, eyeing Jennar, "You have not followed my instructions. And now I must find a way to convince the chief that you have not been taken by an evil spirit. He knows I am here, and has accepted my care of Niann. He asked me to examine you."

"It's my fault. I left Niann. I couldn't convince him to leave." With effort, he managed to sit up to get a better look at Aspen. "My uncle thinks I murdered Heyka and harmed Niann. I don't know what to do. Tell me what to do." He hated the desperation in his voice.

"You already know what must be done." Aspen never lost his calm exterior. "What we feared has come to pass."

Now Jennar could see the object in the shaman's hand clearly for what it was: the shed skin of a snake. He stared. Horror crept down his spine. "He did it. That's where Heyka went. He's transcended, and drained Niann to do it."

"So he has." Aspen set about untying the thongs around Jennar's wrists and ankles.

Jennar's cheeks burned. "I couldn't leave him." He hung his head. How much of this could have been prevented if he'd done what the shaman had asked of him? "It's my fault. I'm afraid to leave him now. Can't you—?" He couldn't finish the question, knowing it was fear and shame that made him ask.

"Yes. I can, but to call your guide for you would rob you of the experience you need, and I could not do such a thing." His face softened. "Niann's love for you is the one thing that kept him alive long enough for me to reach him. You have my assurance that no further harm will come to him if you leave for a short time. What are you afraid of?"

Jennar finally voiced his greatest fear. "That I won't be worthy of either Niann or my totem, whoever it may be." He chuckled. "Already, my uncle has declared me unfit to be Kehani."

"Niann has already chosen you. And trust me, you *are* worthy. You continue to feel this way because you are not whole." Aspen placed a palm flat on Jennar's chest, just over his heart. "He dreams, Jennar. Join him one last time, and this time, come back to me whole."

The world dimmed. Jennar fell backward into the safety of the shaman's arms while his mind shifted from one world to the next.

Back in his deer form, Jennar saw the Bright One. He stood by the stream, nuzzling at a limp, white lump on the ground. Niann, also in deer form, lying on his side, eyes open and glazed. Jennar rushed forward, disbelieving.

The Bright One stepped in front of Niann to block Jennar's advance, limbs splayed wide for balance, head lowered to present his antlers in challenge. *Who are you, shape-changer? You are not one of mine, though your appearance suggests otherwise. The one here is under my protection.*

An irrational surge of anger surged through Jennar. *I promised to protect him from the day he was born.* Jennar paced, unsure of how to continue. *He is my mate. I named him.*

The Bright One snorted. *So you are. So you did. What is it you wish, guideless one?*

*That's not my fault. I went to the dreaming-rock. No one came.*

*As the Raven said, you were not ready.* The Bright One turned to lick Niann's face. The younger deer didn't move, but retained his lost, wandering gaze. The elder turned again toward Jennar. *I will ask again. What is it you wish?*

*Niann has something of mine.*

*So he does.* The white ears twitched in interest. *Your claim is valid, and your soul will be returned to you, but how do I know that you are indeed the best protector for him? Things have not gone as we would have wished.*

Jennar turned his head away. The Deer's words shamed him, but they also fueled a fire deep within his belly. Yes, he had done wrong, but he was determined to make amends in any way possible. He stood as straight as he could, head erect, furred chest forward. *I promised to look after him. I intend to keep that promise.*

The Bright One rushed him.

Jennar lowered his head just in time to meet the Bright One's charge. Antlers cracked together, the sheer force of the impact sending Jennar staggering backward. The Bright One took a step

back, lifted his head slightly, and charged again.

Jennar dug his hooves into the dirt, haunches strained from trying not to lose ground. The Bright One jerked his head, locking their antlers together. He pushed; Jennar slipped and took a few hops backward and then angled his body around so the two deer nearly formed a circle.

The Bright One angled his head again, forcing Jennar's uncomfortably to the side. Jennar had a vague idea of what the Bright One meant to do—twist him so he had no choice but to yield by being pressed into the dirt. He went along with it until he was low enough to gather his legs beneath him and thrust upward. Dust choked the air as antlers loosed from each other.

The two deer circled each other, both wary. Jennar snorted to rid his nose of the ticklish dust. The Bright One reared slightly, then used the forward momentum to lunge forward. Jennar sidestepped, but not quick enough to avoid a graze from the Bright One's antlers.

It stung. Jennar realized he had no idea how far this fight was meant to go; first blood, yield, or death? Not first blood, he found out as the Bright One charged him again. Jennar braced himself. Antlers locked again as they struggled for superiority. Just when Jennar thought he'd gained a few steps, the Bright One used strength to send him back again. A cloud of dust rose into the air as their sharp hooves dug into the ground. Swaths of foliage fell under their exertions.

Again and again, forward and back, the two of them fought until fatigue made them separate. Sides heaving, Jennar took in huge lungfuls of crisp mountain air. The Bright One, too, looked winded. He panted loudly even as he turned to check on Niann.

*Mine*, came the crazy, irrational thought. The Bright One might have chosen Niann for an apprentice, but Jennar had cleaned and cared for him, watched over him as he grew, carved toys and talismans for him. *I love him. He is my mate.*

Jennar gathered the last of his strength and rushed the Deer. Jennar managed to catch the Bright One by surprise; the Deer didn't have time to brace himself and stumbled sideways as Jennar slammed into him. With a snort of challenge, Jennar carefully stepped over Niann's body so that any attack would have a chance of harming Niann. Jennar was willing to bet the Bright One would not try again.

He didn't. *Well played*, the Deer said.

*I love him. I have since the day he was born.*

*So you gave of yourself freely.* Irony clouded the deer's voice. *Almost, you could be one of mine. Now, take what is yours, and protect the rest of us as well as you wish to protect him.* The large deer took a few steps forward and pressed his lips to Jennar's in a movement that Jennar would, in a human, have called a kiss. Warmth rushed through Jennar's body, not the heat of lust, but of something quite different as a sort of energy passed from the Bright One to him. Jennar reeled with the sensation. He'd felt it before, years ago when he was five years old and holding the

newborn Niann in his arms. *No one can benefit from holding a piece of another's soul. Take it, and find your own guide.*

The light from the Bright One's coat began to waver and dim. The world grew faint and shadowy. Jennar pawed the ground, anxious. *Wait—I can't leave him here like this.*

*Don't worry. The raven and I will look after him, and you will be able to return here after...*

After what? Jennar wondered, but a sudden heaviness overtook him and he was back in his own body before he could find out. He opened his eyes to see Aspen crouched over him, face drawn with concern. "Did it work?" Jennar asked.

"Can you not feel the difference?"

Now that Aspen asked, Jennar could. A *rightness* filled him, along with the surety that he knew what his true purpose was.

"Now, do you understand?" Aspen asked him. The shaman's lips remained close to his. "You must go. For the sake of all of us."

He met the shaman's eyes. "What do I do? It's been so long..."

"Take what seems right for you to take. Now that you're whole, your journey should be easier."

"Now?"

"It would be prudent." The shaman smiled. "The Bright One told you true. He and I will care for Niann in your absence. What you've done in the past has been for others. This journey is for yourself."

"My guards—the chief—"

"They will not interfere with my assessment. Your uncle truly wishes you to be well and a part of his tribe, and is willing to abide by my judgment. You are now whole, but in need of spiritual guidance which can only be found at the dreaming-place."

Jennar went back to his own tent and looked around. His bow he wouldn't need. His carving tools...

Almost without thought, he snatched up his carving knife and a chunk of soft pine and tucked them into a leather pouch at his waist. Satisfied, he left the camp and headed up the mountain.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

When Niann opened her eyes, she fully expected to find herself in the spirit world. Instead, she was warm and comfortable in a tent she didn't recognize. The smell of food and drink reached her nose, and her stomach growled. Instead of feeling drained and worn, she actually felt awake. Alive.

A handsome man, maybe a year or two older than Niann, sat opposite her, dressed in a light, woven robe, hair decorated with the beads and feathers of—a shaman. At that thought, everything came back in a rush. Heyka invading her, draining every last bit of energy so he could shed his skin and leave.

She cringed. The young shaman spoke, his voice quiet and soothing without Heyka's manipulative tones. "Forgive me if I startled you. I am the shaman for the Deshani tribe. You may call me Aspen."

"What did you do to me, Raven?" She fought to sit up, grateful that Aspen didn't touch her. She didn't know if she could bear it right now. Under the warm fur, she was naked. The realization made her even more uncomfortable.

His calm, brown eyes watched her, though he did not offer to help her sit upright. "I rid your body of Heyka's foul poisons and helped you regain some of the energy he stole from you."

She shivered and pulled a fur up around her shoulders. "I'm not dead."

"No. Did you wish to be?"

"Yes."

The shaman said nothing, but offered her a strip of venison jerky.

Niann took the dried meat and stared at it. "How did you find me?"

"Jennar needed my help. I came."

The jerky fell from her fingers. Just hearing the name hurt. "Where is he?"

"Gone, to do as he should have years ago."

Niann picked up the jerky and nibbled at it, tasting nothing. "You mean he's gone to find his real spirit guide. I knew he wasn't a cat, after... I knew. Is he coming back?" *For me*, Niann wanted

to ask, but didn't.

"He will, once he finds what he needs."

Niann figured she would have to be satisfied with that. "What happened to—to *him*?"

Aspen spoke matter-of-factly without hesitating on the words that made Niann cringe. "Heyka got what he wanted, by using your body and your gifts to propel him into the spirit world. He's upset the balance there." The shaman looked directly at Niann. "You were the vessel he used to get there. Only you will be able to destroy him."

Niann felt sick. "I can't go after him. I can't. You don't understand..." She buried her head in her hands. "He knows me. He took everything I was and used it."

Aspen touched her cheek, and Niann flinched. She couldn't help it. Every touch reminded her of Heyka and the way the man had held her down, forced her to drink potion after potion. Now that her mind was clear of the drugs, she could recall clearly the feel of Heyka atop her, invading her body and mind.

"If you do not go," Aspen continued, "he will keep looking for energy until he absorbs that of the gods themselves, and after them, the energy of the earth. All life will grow sickly and fade."

"I can't." She felt sick now. The taste of venison turned bitter.

"His abuse of you has left your soul fractured. This, I understand better than you know." Niann's eyes met the young shaman's, and, for once, the shaman seemed uneasy. "It is said that the best healers are those that have suffered themselves and therefore have the compassion needed to understand and help others." He smiled, faint and sad. "I, too, had pieces of my soul stolen when I was young, by men from a neighboring tribe who came with the intention of stealing boy-children to raise as their own. They... mishandled several of us before the Deshani warriors came. I laid senseless in the shaman's tent for several moons. He had to make many spirit journeys to find all the parts of me that were missing. By then, the raven had already made itself known as my spirit guide, and I could do nothing else but follow in my healer's footsteps."

Niann didn't feel compassionate. The anger was too fresh, the pain too raw. In some vague part of her mind, Aspen's words made sense, but Niann wasn't ready to hear them.

Aspen watched her, and when she didn't speak said, "I can force you to do nothing, but it would grieve me to see one with gifts as great as yours withdraw from the world and deny his totem."

"Everything I did—"

"Everything you did was given honestly and freely. No one has suffered from your actions, and many have benefited. Your tribe is healthier than it has been in generations because of your gifts."

The words did little to comfort her. "The tribe is healthy, but the world is in trouble. I was the means."

"But not the cause. That was Heyka's and his alone. His need for power overrode his rational thought." The shaman's eyes glazed over for a moment. "I can feel the imbalance grow. He still hungers for power." With a more focused gaze, he told Niann, "You, too, should be able to sense it."

"No." She'd never leave herself open to the spirit world again. No more channeling power, not when she knew what could be done with it.

The shaman clasped her upper arm. Niann flinched, but Aspen did not let go. "You're still in pain," Aspen said. "Let me help."

*I want Jennar.* The thought came, irrational and unbidden. Jennar. After the way she'd treated him, he'd likely never come back. And if he did, he wouldn't want her as she was. Weak. Crippled. Female. Her crutch, the one Jennar had carved for her, leaned against the tent wall as a reminder of her disability.

"No," Niann said at last. "Leave me alone."

\*\*\*

*Yesss...*

The bright, luminous world met Heyka's eyes. He was *here* at last, permanently, physically in the upper world. He wore his human form, which puzzled him for a moment. On all of his other travels here, he had accompanied his own spirit guide and taken his totem's form. The Snake had come with him, red, yellow and black bands curled around his ankle.

At last he realized that, since he'd made it here on his own power and not his totem's, he'd brought his own form along, and now he had no need for a spirit guide, not when he *was* spirit.

Several other spirits had come to meet him, among them the Bright One himself, the Raven, Hawk, Eagle and Dragonfly. His own Snake hugged his leg tighter, nervous since it was a creature of the earth and lower world, and did not make its home here above.

The Bright One lowered its head and approached him. *You have damaged something that belongs to me.*

*And me,* the Hawk said.

*And me.* The Raven, black as only a cloudy, moonless night could be, shifted from foot to foot on a tree branch. *You do not belong here, soul-stealer and guideless one. Your presence affects the balance.*



"Then there must be a new balance," Heyka said. "I am meant to be here. I've felt it all my life."

*No.* The Bright One took a few steps forward and brandished its antlers. *You will leave and make amends for what you have done.*

"I've done nothing I was not meant to do!" The Deer was close to him now, close enough for Heyka to nearly drown in the spirit's power. He wanted it.

With the skill he'd perfected on Niann, Heyka reached out his awareness toward the Bright One. Power touched power and flared. The Bright One drew back, but not soon enough. Heyka latched on to the Deer and *pulled*.

Energy, more pure and powerful than anything he'd received through Niann, flooded him, almost blinding in its intensity. *Yes!*

Heyka kept going, pulling as much power as he could without going insane. He had to stop, finally, when the Raven swooped at him and broke his concentration. The Bright One staggered backward, shocked and weakened. Most of the other spirits fled in terror. Lost in the taste of power, Heyka hardly noticed. Now that his awareness remained open, he could sense the energy of the entire world.

He licked his lips. No need to bother with these interfering spirits. They were powerful, but the upper world was more so, and it didn't fight back. His bare feet absorbed energy from the very ground he walked on, from the waving grasses and the insects that crawled beneath the surface.

He had transcended. He had shed his skin and become *other*, a being without the limits of a human body. This world and its inhabitants were at his disposal, at it was meant to be.

On the earth, he could still sense a lingering threat. A thought was all it took to urge the Snake to send a messenger, and soon he would be rid of the nuisance forever.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

It took Jennar most of the day to reach the dreaming-place. Tension knotted his body the whole way there. He paid little heed to the scratches earned by blundering through the foliage rather than walking lightly as he'd been taught to do. Crows and magpies called out in warning. A rabbit fled across the path in front of him. His side cramped as he scrambled through the loose shale toward the summit. Only once did he stop, slaking his thirst at the thin, cold stream created from the melting snow above. Memory and fear weighed too heavily, and he continued on.

He couldn't help but remember the last time he'd been here, some seven years ago. The hopes of the tribe had rested on him as Jennar, the chief's only male relative, hunter, tracker, carver. He'd had a prosperous, happy future ahead of him.

And he'd failed. His own fears had cost the tribe their Holy One, and, perhaps, Niann's life. Heyka was in the upper world now, damaging it in his quest for more power. The world was out of balance, all because Jennar couldn't bring himself to leave Niann and do as Aspen had told him.

He sat on the large, flat rock that overlooked both the camp of his own tribe and that of the Deshani, only the size of a tick in the distance. The wind bit at him. This high up, the air was cold. He hadn't brought a blanket, and making a fire was impossible because of the breeze.

He brought out the block of wood and his carving knife, but for once, he held them both, and felt nothing.

"Not now," he said. Disappointment and rage clouded his vision. For the second time, he'd failed, and this time he had no excuses. He was whole, now, his soul intact. "Don't let my gift desert me now. I'm ready. I've come here to listen, and to see."

For a long time, he felt only the cold breeze battering at his bare skin. Disappointment faded to numbness, rage to bitter acceptance. The gods didn't want him. Neither would Niann. He'd never be able to face the man he loved.

Night fell and the moon strode halfway across the sky before Jennar could bring himself to move. Idly, he touched knife to wood and carved out a sliver. And another. His mind emptied, and his hands moved of their own accord. This was different; whatever was in the wood was using him to get out, not the other way around.

All awareness of his body faded as he gave himself over to the carving. He was faintly aware of the scent of fresh wood, but he might as well have been carving blind. He didn't know what would emerge.

The shrill cry of a hawk startled him out of his trance to find the midday sun beating down on the rock. In shock, he looked down. Nestled in his palm was his most exquisite carving yet, a red-tailed hawk in full flight, sharp talons curved in anticipation of snatching a meal. "Oh," Jennar said, an inadequate word for the sense of rightness flowing through him. The feathers on the wings were so detailed that they looked as though they could move. Surely, any moment now, the carving would right itself and take off from his hand.

The cry came again. Jennar raised his head to see a red-tailed hawk balanced in the branches of a nearby pine. The bird cocked its head and mantled. It swooped down from the branch, flying low toward Jennar. The hunter watched as movement seemed to slow. He could see each flap of wings, every touch of wind on the feathers as the hawk dove at him, coming nearer and nearer until one foot deeply gouged his skin. Agony blossomed in his shoulder as the hawk screeched its victory and swerved in mid-air to return to its perch.

Time sped up again. Jennar's bare shoulder ran with blood from the marks, three parallel lines on the back and one in the front. A god had marked him at last. He looked up at the bird, half elated and half afraid. He looked straight into one of the piercing, yellow eyes and fell—

No, not *fell*. Not exactly. His body plunged down and then caught on a current of air, which buoyed him upward. He let out a cry of his own. Beside him, his totem flew in a blaze of coppery-red. This was what had happened when Aspen took him elsewhere to fly. Aspen had inadvertently shown him his true form, but Jennar hadn't been ready. Now he was, and his powerful wings felt as natural as the deer's body had.

*I have been waiting,* the Hawk said. *Come. There is little time, and you have much to see.*

See. That, and so much more. They flew, for moments or days Jennar didn't know. The Hawk taught him to See with a hawk's clarity of vision so Jennar understood the entirety of his gift, how he was able to call the spirits from the wood, and why he'd been able to judge people so correctly. He saw beneath the surface, to their true essence. With a hawk's eyes, everything was new again, sharp and clear, from a mouse rustling in the brush to the aspens shivering in the wind.

The Hawk was pleased at his reaction. *Now you See as you were meant to. Look above us.*

Jennar looked up through a break in the clouds and saw a world beyond. Beautiful and much like his own, except the plants and trees seemed to be even more perfect and alive.

*Come,* the Hawk said, and lead Jennar through the break. Once within the upper world, Jennar felt an immediate sense of peace. His totem guided him to a pine. Jennar landed with an awkward flapping of wings as he struggled to get his balance. Some things he had yet to learn in this new form.

*Welcome, Hawk and Hawk's apprentice.* Below them knelt the Bright One, who looked somehow less resplendent than Jennar remembered. The Deer noticed his scrutiny. *Heyka seeks*

*power at the expense of us all.*

The Bright One turned to look to his left, and Jennar followed his gaze. In the distance, the sky darkened. The horizon was little more than a haze, an impenetrable fog that even Jennar's hawk-sharp eyes couldn't penetrate. *That is Heyka's doing. He is not meant to be here. Everything he touches, he drains.*

Jennar shuddered, remembering the darkness as he'd first seen it, surrounding the thrashing body of the deer. *How do we stop it?*

*Restore the balance,* the Bright One said. *You and my apprentice must do it. We who were born in the upper world have no power against him.*

Niann. Jennar felt a pang of concern. He had no idea how long he'd been gone, or what might have happened to Niann by now.

*He lives,* the Bright One assured him. *The Raven is with him, but you must go to him now.*

*Courage,* the Hawk told him before Jennar felt a sickening disorientation. He fell...

...and, with a jolt, woke up on the pink granite of the dreaming stone, heart pounding. Blood flowed sluggishly from his injured shoulder. The hawk carving and tools were still in his hands. He shoved them into his pouch before he leapt to his feet and ran, not caring who heard him. His uncle would not deny him now. The Hawk had marked his apprentice for all to see, and the tribe would not argue with one who bore the gift of True Sight.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Aspen and the chief waited for Jennar when he returned to camp, their pose eerily reminiscent of the first time Jennar had gone to the dreaming-place and failed. He stood before them, breathing hard from his exertions. Aspen strode forward and palmed Jennar's face. With the touch came a jolt of sensation. Jennar could *see* the power within the shaman.

Jennar reached inside his pouch and pulled out the carving. It still pulsed with a life of its own. The small, carved eyes held an intelligent gaze, as if the spirit of the hawk had invaded the wood itself. Aspen nodded approvingly and then flaked away some of the crusted blood on Jennar's shoulder to get a better look at the wounds. Satisfied, Aspen turned to the chief. "Your nephew has been chosen by the red-tailed hawk and rightly marked. He bears the gift of Sight."

When Jennar looked at his uncle, he had the same disorienting feeling of seeing *beyond* the chief's skin. A mixture of relief, pride, and the stubbornness of the Bear totem in a man whose greatest desire was to see the safety and increase of his people. A flaw as much as it was a strength, and one Heyka had manipulated as expertly as he'd used Niann. "I am glad you are well," the chief said. "Aspen has given me much wise counsel and shown me my faults. Forgive me, Nephew, for my doubts."

"In time, perhaps." Not yet. Not while Niann remained ill and Heyka threatened to destroy everything they knew.

The chief's face clouded in anger, but when he caught a warning look from Aspen, it cleared. "As you wish. I am proud of you, and fearful of what lies ahead."

None of it would be before them, if it weren't for the chief's weakness in listening to Heyka, or his stubbornness over Niann. Jennar held his tongue. It wouldn't do either of them any good to argue.

Aspen used his head to gesture toward Niann's tent. "Go. My work is not yet done for the night, but he is waiting for you."

Heart pounding, Jennar ran toward the tent. Niann.

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Jennar ducked into the tent, fearful of his reception. Evidently Niann had the same thoughts. He sat as far to the back of the tent as he could, nervousness written in every muscle. For the first time in moons, Niann was completely dressed... as a woman. Beads and feathers decorated his braided hair. A deer's sigil was emblazoned on the chest of the simple leather dress he wore.

"Niann," Jennar said, mouth dry. He knelt on the ground a fair distance away, reminded of the dreams in which he had to be careful not to frighten the other deer away. Niann looked like that now, poised and ready to flee at the first sign of danger.

"Jennar." He spoke softly, feminine. "I missed you."

Niann held out a hand. Jennar took it, knowing that Niann wanted the same thing from the touch, to find out the truth. The incongruity of seeing *within* and *without* seemed to be lessening with every person Jennar saw, but it was still mildly disconcerting, especially in Niann's case. Nothing matched.

The worst was the realization that, like Jennar had been, Niann wasn't whole. A piece of Niann's soul was missing, and Jennar was certain that a certain snake-protected shaman had stolen it for his own use.

After a few moments, Niann snatched his hand away. "What do you see in me, Hawk?" He gestured to the bloody marks on Jennar's shoulder.

"I see someone fearful and confused, unsure of who he is. Someone who has had something vital stolen from him."

"Aspen told me as much, but you speak to me wrongly. I am a woman, not a man."

"No." Jennar grabbed Niann's upper arms and shook him. "No! You are not a woman, not in mind, and certainly not in body."

"But the deer—" Niann choked.

"When two males mate, neither one becomes female, or acts in the least like a female. They are still male and still act masculine. The shaman lied to you. He lied to the entire tribe for the sake of being able to use you."

Niann pulled away and half-stumbled, half-crawled out of the tent, awkward on his lamed leg. He limped away from the tent as fast as he could before Jennar caught up with him. Jennar grabbed him around the chest, lifting him off the ground. Niann fought, kicking and struggling. "What does he want with me? What does he *want*?"

Jennar knew he meant the Bright One. They sank down to the ground together, Niann's chest heaving with exertion and emotion. "All I wanted—all I ever wanted was to be accepted, to be a hunter like you. To be a man. I don't want this."

"You *are* accepted. No matter what the shaman told you, no matter what you've done."

"No. I'm not like you. They took that chance away. And now I can't be a man. It's too late." He turned his stricken face toward Jennar. "Why did you have to come and ruin everything? I

was fine when it was just Heyka and me. I didn't doubt. Everything felt right."

"Everything?"

Niann let out a strangled cry. "It shouldn't have happened. Why did you come back to me? Why?" He pounded his fists against Jennar's arms. "Why do I feel like I know you, like I've been in your arms before when I haven't?"

"You have," Jennar said. "I was there the day you were born. I picked you up from the ground where the women had left you and cleaned your mother's blood from your skin. I held you at night while you slept, fed you, comforted you when you cried."

"You should have left me alone. Then none of this would have happened. Why didn't you let me die with my mother?"

"Because I loved you then just as I do now. I wanted to give you the chance—" Words caught in Jennar's throat. "The chance to be what you were meant to be."

"Which is what? The tribe's whore? Heyka's catamite? The reason we're all in danger now?"

"You know what I am now, don't you? What I've become since my journey to the dreaming-place?" Jennar touched his wounded shoulder. It burned.

Niann nodded, sullen.

"I can See. To some extent, I've always been able to. And what I See in you is a man blessed by the Bright One. I See you as you are, as a man, as I always have."

"Cursed, is more like it. It's easy for you. You want what you have. I don't. If I weren't 'blessed,' this wouldn't have happened. Heyka wouldn't have used me to—to—"

"He would have found someone else. Someone weaker, who wouldn't have survived. Tell me something. In your dreams with the Bright One, were you male or female? In mine, you were always a handsome young hart. Not a doe."

Niann took a moment to think. "Hart," he said in a hoarse whisper. "But, for so long, I've felt and believed otherwise."

"I know." Jennar held him tighter, wishing there was a way he could take away Niann's pain and doubt. The thin body quivered in his arms. "I love you, Niann. Ever since the first moment I saw you, I knew you were special. It's not the love a father has for his son, or one brother has for another. For *you*. You told me once, back in your tent, how much you wanted me. Have you changed your mind?"

For a long time, Niann didn't answer. Jennar dared to kiss down the slope of his neck to his shoulder. Niann trembled, but didn't resist. Jennar wanted this more than anything, to hold

Niann in his arms and keep the man close. Niann relaxed against him, and Jennar's hand strayed up Niann's leg and beneath the dress to fondle Niann's erection, thick and hard with soft, smooth skin. Jennar stroked it from base to tip, and for a few moments Niann seemed to relax and enjoy Jennar's attention.

But when Jennar started to lift the dress all the way up, Niann stiffened and swiveled to look at him from an arm's length away. "Don't touch me like that. I'm not what you want me to be, and you—" Niann's expression turned to fury. "You're like *him*, only using me for your own means. I hate you for what you've done to me. You're a liar. I never want to see you again."

He jerked out of Jennar's grip and stumbled to stand. He grabbed the crutch and lurched forward, the atrophied leg making his progress slow and painful to watch.

Jennar averted his eyes and did not go after Niann. He could do no more for Niann. Perhaps, he thought guiltily, he'd already done too much in managing to hurt Niann again. He went to find Aspen in the hopes that one of them might think of a way to defeat Heyka.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Niann ran as fast as the lamed leg would allow. Into the trees, away from the camp, the shaman, and Jennar, whose words kept echoing in Niann's head.

*You're a man. I See you as a man.*

Was it the truth? *What were you in the dreams?*

Niann didn't feel like a man, but neither did femininity feel right. Heyka had said Niann was a female during the ceremony, but saying it didn't make it true, no matter how it had felt at the time. It all made sense, once. The blessings had felt right. Good, even. They'd all come for help, and Niann had given it to them. In those visits, the Holy One's sex was a fluid thing, changing to fit the need of the visitors.

Everything had been fine, livable, until Jennar had made Niann question Heyka's actions, and until Heyka had used Niann to get what he wanted. Now, nothing made sense. Male. Female. Blessed, or cursed. Nothing made sense anymore. A man as Niann knew it was someone who had gone through the proper rituals of the tribe, learning to hunt and walk silently, to carve and fletch weapons, and to display feats of strength and speed. A woman cooked and tended the fires, gathered food, made clothing and raised the children. Niann hadn't done any of that.

Birds scattered as Niann plunged through the trees, heedless of the silent walking learned so long ago. It didn't matter anymore. There was no shame in someone living as the sex other than the one they were born with. There were two or three among the Kehani and their wishes were respected. No one questioned them or ridiculed their decision. Most of the time, they'd gone to the dreaming-place and seen what they were meant to become.

So had Niann. It just wasn't anything like what Niann had expected.

Jennar's touch had stirred up far too many feelings, mostly in regards to Heyka. No doubt Heyka was above in the upper world, enjoying himself while he gathered more power.

A lie. Everything had been a lie, from Heyka's "care" to Jennar's refusal to let Niann touch him the first time. And now—now Niann didn't know what to do about Jennar. Jennar wanted Niann, he'd made that clear, but Niann's feelings remained conflicted.

It wasn't Niann's feelings for Jennar that made things so difficult, but the feelings Niann had about her—his?—gender. Niann wanted to believe Jennar, wanted it more than anything, but Heyka's words and actions had left too much of an impression. The shaman knew more about

spiritual matters than Jennar, but Heyka had twisted his knowledge for his own purposes. Had he told Niann the truth, or had he lied?

Niann stumbled into a clearing right in front of several kala deer. They started, staring at him with wary, black eyes, but didn't run. They were all a mottled mix of brown and white as their winter coats began to grow in.

Niann took a few steps forward so that the nearest deer, a young hart with small, velvet-covered antlers, was almost within reach. "Tell me the truth," Niann said. "Tell me what I am!"

They fled at the sound of the harsh words, the lean, furry bodies gracefully leaping away. Niann sank to the ground, head buried in hands, heart clouded in despair. No one would help, not even the Bright One. Everyone had been driven away.

Pain gave Niann a starting point. If no one would help, Niann would have to come to an understanding alone. Daunting. The lamed leg hurt as it always did. Worse, after the headlong rush into the forest. Heyka always used to—

Niann cried out and curled up on the ground amidst the rotting leaves, almost sick with the memory. Now that Heyka was no longer around to ply mind- or body-numbing draughts, everything was painfully clear. Anger coursed through Niann's body. How dare Heyka do such a thing to the Holy One? How could he lie to everyone and forsake his people for his own greediness?

*I See you as a man. I See....* The words echoed in Niann's head, belying the shaman's words, but Jennar was new to his gifts, still learning to use his sight. Perhaps in this one instance he was wrong, blinded by his own wish for what he wanted Niann to be. Niann knew Jennar bedded males rather than females, so it only made sense that he'd want Niann to be the male the body portrayed.

But who was Niann, really? Man or woman? The body mattered little, as Niann well knew, but the dress came off anyway. Kneeling on the ground, Niann tested the body to see whether it felt more male or female. Hands searched the masculine flesh, as if physical sensation alone would be enough of an answer.

It still felt pleasure. Despite anger at Jennar's treatment, and the shame that came at the thought of Heyka's touch, the body responded to wandering hands. The cock hardened as the friction went from slow to fast and rough. Niann wanted it to be painful, as if in penance for the pleasure gotten from helping the people. Niann couldn't decide. It had been good to help. It felt good. Yet so much of it had been wrong and deceitful.

*Only Heyka,* came the thought.

Niann wondered about ever being able to love again, if intimately tending to the people would be possible or only a source of revulsion. Niann's fist clenched and turned nails to skin. Maybe it

could be torn away, ripped apart, and then Niann wouldn't have to decide. The body wouldn't have any sex at all...

*Stop*, someone said.

Intensity of purpose made Niann deaf toward any interference. Pain and need flared. Soon, soon it would be over.

Or so Niann thought until a soft muzzle knocked hands away from flesh. Another head-butt and Niann tumbled over. *You'll ruin yourself.*

The Bright One. Niann stared at him, more resentful and angry than relieved. "What am I? Tell me!"

The Deer knelt on the ground beside Niann. *There is no reason to say what you already know. Why do you resist the truth?*

"What truth? I'm not a man or a woman. I'm a freak. An outcast."

*Mine.* The deer nuzzled Niann's neck and shoulders. *You are as you are made. Body of a man, heart of a woman. Either, or both. The Hawk's apprentice loves you. He fought me for you.*

"Did he?" Niann murmured. Petting the Bright One had a calming effect, although the Deer's appearance worried Niann. The coat had dimmed, and the animal looked thin and haggard, far less magnificent than before. It pained Niann to see it. "I want to be a man for him. He wants it so badly."

*A fish cannot breathe the air when it tires of the water, no matter how hard it tries.*

"But what am I, if I can't be what he wants?"

*Finish what you started, gently, and find out.*

Niann nodded, teeth gritted against the dull, needy ache below. Hands traveled down to (his?) cock and touched it, stroking until it lengthened and hardened, struggling to accept the organ as part of (him)self despite the feelings that suggested otherwise.

Soft grass poked into Niann's back as (she?) let go of the cock and rubbed at the smooth expanse of flesh between (her) legs. (She? He?) groaned when one finger, then two slipped inside to explore while the other hand went back to fisting (his/her) cock. Niann shuddered, remembering Heyka's rough hands, or the soft, gentle ones of many of the people who had sought help from the Holy One. Niann continued, focusing on sensation, on the *good* feelings, until the negative ones associated with Heyka were eclipsed by the knowledge that in sex lay power to be used for either good or ill. Niann knew (he/she) had been born for this. Despite Heyka's betrayal, Niann had no regrets. The Deer had chosen rightly in Niann.

Niann whimpered and buried (his/her) face in the Bright One's fur when the orgasm hit. In that moment, Niann had a sudden revelation. Niann was *him*, for now, although also *her* from time to time. He didn't have to decide on just one gender, especially when his calling asked for both. He became whatever his partner needed at the time, both sides of him freely given.

As soon as the spasms subsided, Niann embraced the Bright One's neck and, relieved, sobbed into the white fur. The Bright One nuzzled Niann's neck and cheeks. "I understand now," Niann told him. "I do."

The warm fur beneath his flesh suddenly grew cold. Niann looked up, startled to see the Bright One fading. *The shaman weakens us. I must go. I may not be able to return.*

The Deer dimmed and vanished. Niann scrambled to his feet and dressed. He cursed his lame leg as he rushed through the forest, hopping on his crutch as much as he could. Home, toward Jennar. They had to find a way to stop Heyka before the gods disappeared forever.

As soon as Niann stepped into his tent, Jennar grasped his hands. No hint of anger rested in Jennar's face. "Are you all right?"

Niann nodded, touched by Jennar's worry. He hoped it would last until after he'd told Jennar what needed to be said. "I am not a man, not always, but neither am I always a woman. I am both, and neither, but it is the way I'm meant to be. Can you See, or will you be as blind as Heyka to everything but your own desires?"

Jennar didn't answer, but placed his mouth over Niann's. "I See you," Jennar said during one of the brief times he came up for air. "I love you, Niann, whatever you choose to be. Male or female, it's your heart and soul I love. What body they wear doesn't matter."

With those words, a final barrier within Niann cracked, which enabled him to absorb and accept the truth of Jennar's love. "Hold me. That's all I want right now. Just hold me."

Jennar did. It felt right, so right, yet Niann shivered, all too aware of how tenuous their love was until they found a way to defeat Heyka.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Aspen returned to the tent later that afternoon to find Niann curled against Jennar. Neither said anything, but rather found enough communication in the fact that they were together and in love. Jennar's hands were busy kneading Niann's weak leg, while Niann looked content to doze against his lover's broad chest.

The way it should be, but it might not last. They would both need the strength of each other if they were to fight Heyka in the upper world, and they'd need Aspen's help to get there.

They were so absorbed in each other that they didn't notice Aspen until he bumped a clay pot of oil against Jennar's arm. "Here. This will help."

They both sobered when they saw Aspen's face, but Jennar took the oil. A few moments later, the two lovers had relaxed again and the faint scent of pine spread throughout the tent. One of the women brought them a meal of venison stew and flatbread. They all ate a nourishing, if tense, meal. When the last bowl was empty, Aspen spoke. "Tell me what you saw when you visited with your totem spirit, Jennar."

Jennar told them both what he'd seen. Niann seconded the report of weakening gods, relating his recent experience with the Bright One.

"They are guides," Aspen said. "Not warriors. They have little or no protection against one such as Heyka that wishes to steal their power. I, too, feel the drain of the spirit world. My totem no longer answers my call. I do not know if I will have the strength to raise you both to the upper world on my own, but I must try. Are you both ready?"

Niann clutched Jennar's arm, looking a little pale, but he nodded, as did the seer.

Aspen had gathered the necessary items earlier that day. Jennar stoked a small fire while Aspen threw a handful of potent incense into the flames. The herbs were meant to lower any barriers to his own energy store, conscious or not. Always before, he'd had his totem's energy to borrow, but not this time. The energy it took to send both men to the upper world might well take all of his reserves, and if it did, Aspen meant to give his life to see it done.

A thick, green scent filled the tent. Aspen breathed deeply and regularly, relaxing himself, gathering together the mental and physical resources he would need. Soon, now. He tapped into his internal energy before seeking the souls of Niann and Jennar.

He felt a sharp prick at his ankle. Agony worse than anything Aspen had felt before spread through his body like fire. He opened his eyes to see the creature who'd sunk its fangs into him.

Snake, and no ordinary beast for all that it looked like a coral snake. Jennar pulled the knife from his waistband and aimed.

The snake's tongue flicked out, tasting the air. *You will interfere no more*, it said, directed at Aspen.

Aspen heard the fleeting thought, but could do nothing to react. The snake was fast, extraordinarily so. Its fangs sank into Aspen's leg a second time, just as Jennar's knife cut the serpent's body cleanly in half. The two halves thrashed until Jennar threw them into the fire, where they disappeared in a plume of smoke.

Cold. Aspen shivered as his body went numb. Yet this was worse than a poisonous snake bite. Aspen could feel the venom crawling deep inside him to places where blood did not flow.

Straight to his soul.

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Niann cried out. Heyka's doing. It had to be. Surprise crossed Aspen's face and, for the first time, a trace of fear as he looked at the twin punctures in his ankle.

"What do we do?" Jennar reached tentatively toward the shaman's leg. He looked as wan and frightened as Aspen.

"There is nothing you can do. It was no ordinary bite. It's not poison of the blood, but of the soul." Aspen winced. "Fight Heyka. If he is defeated, I may be able to draw on my totem's power, but for now, the Raven is weak."

"But we can't get there, not without your help!"

Aspen smiled. "There is another way. A Deer must guide you."

"No." Niann's insistence surprised them both. "I know what you're suggesting. I won't. I can't, not after..." *Not after what Heyka did to me*, he wanted to say. For all that he was calm enough to travel to the upper world with help, he didn't want to leave himself as vulnerable as he had with Heyka.

"Then my death will be the least of your worries." He gasped, and his skin turned ashen. "I'm sorry. I wanted to help. I wanted to be there."

Jennar eased the shaman back into the pile of furs. Aspen closed his eyes, obviously focused inward now. The seer turned to Niann, gazing at him with brown eyes that Saw the truth. "Heyka took your courage and your faith in yourself. Trust me, Niann. I would never hurt you. Everything I am is yours. Freely given. I promised the Bright One to protect you, always, and

this I vow, no matter where our journey takes us." He held out his hands. "Touch me. Know me. Bless me, Holy One."

Niann swallowed his fear and clasped Jennar's hands. "I'm afraid."

"I know."

Niann took one of Jennar's palms and traced the lines within it. Despite his fear, need flared within him. He wanted Jennar, wanted to feel the older man's arms around him and that cock within him. Memories flooded his mind of the deer dreams, and Niann realized he already knew Jennar's spirit, if not his human form.

Eyes closed, he let his consciousness sink into Jennar's body. A Hawk, swift and sure, deadly accurate. A fierce guardian, protector and lover. Blind, he explored Jennar by touch alone, grateful that Jennar only wore a breechclout so Niann could explore every bit of skin. The Hawk sat perfectly still, which made Niann more comfortable. This had to be done on Niann's terms, under his control.

Niann got to his knees so he could reach Jennar's face. He rested his cheek against Jennar's, nuzzling as a newborn foal might, breathing in the heady, masculine sent. Jennar's skin burned beneath Niann's determined fingers. A twist of his head, and their lips met. Jennar tasted sweet, like *haka* berries, and offered no resistance when Niann explored his mouth. Niann swung his hips forward so they were crotch to crotch and felt Jennar's eager hardness waiting for him. "Take me," Niann whispered. "I want you."

Jennar needed no urging. Strong, rough hands lifted the leather dress over Niann's head, leaving him naked and at Jennar's mercy. A swipe of Jennar's arms, and Niann found himself held tight within them in a fierce embrace that showed Jennar's love for him.

Heat rushed through his body, much as it had when he'd been with Heyka. The sensation frightened him. Jennar must have caught the sudden tension, because he said, "It's all right. It's me. You're safe."

*Safe.* Niann's fingers found their way upward, exploring the angles of Jennar's jaws and cheeks, tracing the gentle dip of his eyes. "I have to know," he whispered, "that you won't... use me, like *he* did."

"Never," Jennar answered with such fierceness that all remaining doubts in Niann's mind vanished. "I will love you, and respect you." His lips met Niann's. "And love you..."

No more words. Niann fumbled with the knots on Jennar's breechclout until he'd wrested the fabric away and could wrap a fist around the length of Jennar's heated cock.

With a moan, Jennar raked his hands through Niann's hair. "I learned a few things from the Deshani women. At first, I didn't want them, but now..." he hissed in pleasure as Niann started to gently massage his balls, "now, I'm glad I did. I want to show you. I want to love you as you

should have been loved all along."

At that, he used his weight to press Niann backward into the furs. Jennar pinned him down, but Niann didn't mind. He trusted Jennar to know what he was doing and not to hurt him.

Niann relaxed and let Jennar do as he wished. His body tingled at every stroke of Jennar's hands, every brush of those lips. No one had ever done this for him, not even the shaman. Everyone had been quick in wanting their pleasure, but Jennar took his time, letting the sensation and energy build between them.

Jennar's hands traveled over him much as he'd seen the Hawk explore a piece of wood to discover the shape within. Niann felt as if Jennar did the same to him, touching him just so *here* and *there* to bring out Niann's true essence, to elicit sensations that no one else had before and to somehow make Niann more real and alive. He brought out Niann's true sexuality in ways no one had before, not any of those who'd asked for his blessing, and certainly not Heyka. Except with the shaman, Niann had never felt ashamed by what he did. He was a Deer; it was his privilege and duty to be intimate with other members of the tribe for their benefit. But none of them saw *him*, only the Holy One, someone to be revered and honored.

Jennar Saw and knew him. That was his gift, to See into others to know the true essence of them... including what to do to excite them sexually. When Jennar put his warm mouth over Niann's cock, Niann shuddered in pleasure. He tangled his fingers in Jennar's hair while Jennar licked and sucked at his cock until Niann grew painfully hard. Niann groaned when Jennar took his mouth away. "Is that what you learned from the women? How to torture me?"

"How to tease," Jennar said, rubbing the smooth expanse of skin between Niann's legs, "and delight."

Male and female. Jennar knew how to bring out the feelings of both in him

The last of Niann's reluctance fell away. He opened himself to the gift the Bright One had given him and sought contact with Jennar's totem. The Hawk shrieked its approval with Jennar's voice. *What little I can give is yours*, the Hawk said.

Niann took the thread of energy, faded as it was, and added it to the store building between him and Jennar. They needed more. Much more.

Jennar shouldn't be the only one giving. Niann fumbled for the bowl of grease he knew was nearby, hardly able to concentrate on anything but his lover's touch. He found it, then gently forced Jennar into an upright position so he could slick Jennar's dripping cock. Jennar's lips met his again, and this time they didn't let go, not even when Niann turned around so Jennar could have easier access.

They were both on their knees, spooned against each other. One hand tickled Niann's nipple while the other wrapped around his cock and pulled him tight against Jennar's body. Jennar's cock found the nether entrance and eased itself slowly inside, taunting Niann with pleasures yet



to come. Niann cursed under his breath while his eyes leaked tears of frustration. Jennar could be so cruel.

Yet Niann knew the teasing heightened the pleasure and the energy shared between them. And in the midst of it, Niann realized that he didn't have to drain himself to buoy them upwards. With love, they reflected the energy of each other and it kept growing, and they could bounce off one another to gain rather than lose their energy.

Jennar finally pressed himself entirely inside and held himself there. Niann groaned. He'd never felt anything as comfortable and *right* as this.

Nor had he ever felt so needy.

As if in answer, Jennar started pumping in and out with maddening slowness. His fist allowed Niann to do the same. Faster, faster, until Niann couldn't tell where Jennar's body stopped and his own began. They were one creature, one force. Their breaths rose and fell at the same time, their hearts pounded at the same rate.

Almost time. The thought broke through the haze of pleasure. "Now, Jennar," Niann said, breathless. "Are you ready?"

Mouth busy, Jennar mumbled some assent. One final thrust, and climax hit them both at the same time. Niann cried out as spasms wracked his body. Jennar gripped him tightly around the chest, and they rode out the waves of pleasure together as the energy continued to grow.

In the midst of the heat, their two gifts collided and joined. The Deer's energy fused with the Hawk's sight, and together they soared upward to the plane of the gods, to the place where Heyka and his darkness waited.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Heyka was disappointed. There should have been something more to this upper world. What good was being a god if one had power and didn't use it? The Bright One and his allies had offered little resistance with their talk of balance and thievery. Nothing was stolen if it would eventually belong to him anyway. The entire mortal world would be his to do with as he pleased, once he was rid of the Bright One and the others.

From his vantage point above, he could see the entire world and feel the energy of the mortals resonate in his body. Those who shared his totem, the snake, were the easiest to find, but as he drained the energies of the deer, raven and hawk, their apprentices became that much clearer and easier to reach.

That's how he knew when the interfering Deshani shaman had to be stopped. And now, he knew that the young Deer he'd used was still alive.

*No.* Anger flared within his chest. Niann should have been dead, all access to this realm cut off once he'd gotten rid of Aspen. Instead, he could feel the steady building of energy as Niann mated to create the bridge between the worlds. They came for him, to stop him.

More. He would need more energy to fight against them. Heyka drew on the energy from every god he could reach, indifferent to their cries of pain. He would not give up what he'd fought so hard to achieve. He belonged here, in the plane of the gods, and no one would tear him from it.

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Jennar could feel the difference in the energy even before they left their bodies to take flight. The air was harsh and uneven, and Jennar had to struggle to stay aloft and to stay in the direction he meant to go. He could sense Niann behind him, but dared not look back.

An eternity later, they made it. Jennar came to perch on Niann's antlers, as the devastation around them made landing anywhere else impossible.

The upper world was dying. The perfect trees wilted, dead leaves dropping from their branches. The ground oozed, forcing Niann to pick his way carefully through the muck. The place was eerily quiet. None of the totem gods came out to meet them this time, and Jennar wondered if any of them were left.

Finding Heyka wasn't hard. The shaman's need for energy tugged at them, seeing them as fresh, untapped sources. All of the plants and trees bowed in one direction, as if Heyka exerted a physical as well as spiritual force to draw in what he wanted.

If it weren't for the light emanating from his body, Heyka would have been standing in pitch darkness. For several paces around him, nothing existed. Any plant life had been utterly absorbed. He still wore human form, though his robes had become as shredded as the world around him. Naked, save for a few remaining tatters and the long, loose hair swirling around his head. A coral snake that was more than just a snake curled around one ankle. Jennar could see its displeasure, but whether it was directed at Heyka or the two interlopers, Jennar couldn't tell.

*Heyka, Jennar said.*

The sound of his name got the shaman's attention. Beneath Jennar, Niann shuddered as two blazing eyes focused on them both. The look on his face was anything but sane. The snake spasmed once. Jennar's perception of it changed. Was the Snake corrupting Heyka, or was it the other way around? Heyka couldn't have come this far without some support from his totem. Surely no god—even one at home in the lower instead of the upper world—could condone the annihilation of its fellow gods. The balance must be kept for the sake of them all.

Yet the snake was a god of life and death, of transformation. The shed skin the raven had brought to Jennar's tent had been evidence of the transition into the upper world.

*He is a weak and frightened man, Niann said. I see it now. The Snake is a powerful totem for a shaman, but Heyka let himself be swayed by its need for change. He used me as he used others, because he wanted to evolve and feared becoming nothing.*

Niann directed his attention toward the shaman. *Don't you see? There will be nothing left. You will be a god of pain and suffering. You're a shaman. You saved my life once.*

"I belong here. There is nothing left for me down below. I've waited years for this. You have no idea what I sacrificed to get here!" Heyka still spoke with a human voice. Sparks danced on the ends of his hair.

*You sacrificed everything, including your humanity and your profession. I see you as the man you once were. A great healer, sidetracked by lust and greed. An honest man. Someone who cared for his people, Jennar said.*

Niann took another step forward, braving the dangerous zone of energy. *You were used, as I was, to fulfill the selfish purpose of another. What good is this upper world or the status of a god if there is nothing left?*

"Destruction comes hand in hand with creation. I will rebuild. Our people will be greater than they ever were. I will create a new way of life—"

The shaman's speech continued. Jennar eyed the Snake. The tongue flicked in and out, tasting. Niann managed to interrupt the shaman and argue, and the Snake made the mistake of watching the hart instead of the hawk.

Jennar plunged headlong toward the shaman, talons out, aiming for the snake. Rescue or murder, he didn't know, but this rape of the upper world and its gods ended. Now.

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Heyka saw only the rival for Niann's love, the man he should have done away with years ago through some subtle accident.

He drew energy to him, swirling it around as if enveloping himself in a robe. The sky darkened. Thunder rumbled in the distance.

*Wait*, he told himself, as, heartbeat by heartbeat, the hawk flew closer. *Wait*.

*Now*.

A burst of energy swirled out from his fingers, aimed directly at the hawk. The raptor's shrill cry cut through the air. The hawk was only Jennar's spirit in the form of his totem, but spirits, too, could be harmed as much as their mortal bodies. Light pulsed and grew, surrounding the bird in a womb of deadly energy.

For it was death, not birth, that Heyka wished. The hawk convulsed, head and wings twisting into unnatural positions. This was the beast that had ruined all of Heyka's plans. Jennar, whom Niann believed and trusted and *loved*. Heyka was a shaman; he knew well the methods of healing and piecing souls together.

This time, he focused on tearing one apart. It was easier than he'd thought to find Jennar's soul. All he had to do was imagine Jennar's essence as an onion and peel back the layers. The chunks divided and fractured. Heyka smiled as he used the energy to peel the layers and toss the pieces away. This was a bit like Jennar's carving, tossing the bits of excess wood aside to discover the treasure beneath. Only this time, he meant to carve until there was nothing left and to do it as painfully as possible.

The hawk glowed with a blue fire. Ethereal flames licked at the feathers and talons. The chest rose and fell so rapidly that Heyka thought it might burst. With effort, the hawk turned one fierce, golden eye toward the shaman, still defiant in the midst of its torture.

The look incensed Heyka even more. He ripped at the hawk, tearing its very essence to shreds. Dimly, he could feel the Snake's coolness as it slithered up his leg and then around his waist and chest, but his focus remained on the bird.

Only when the body was little more than a mass of pulpy feathers and bone did the shaman release it. The bird fell, and fell.

Niann screamed, a bone-chilling shriek that mixed the dying cries of a deer with the agony of a human. *Murderer*.

The sound startled both man and Snake, and in those few moments of distraction, the deer made its move. Heyka had used all of his resources to attack the hawk, which left him defenseless when the sharp antlers of a kala deer ran him through.

Heyka looked dully down at himself, at the points that had gone clean through his body, as well as that of the Snake. Disbelief took him before the pain did. Unlike Niann, he was here in the flesh and only protected by the powers he could gather around himself. His remaining energy went toward preserving his life so he didn't bleed to death. The Snake thrashed feebly, its body skewered in four different places.

The hart braced itself for one great feat of strength. It lifted its impaled victim high and, with a mighty toss of its head, flung Heyka toward the earth.

## CHAPTER THIRTY

*Here. The traitor was here. Flesh and blood and bone.*

Niann followed the trail down from the upper world and opened his eyes to find himself straddling Heyka with his hands around the shaman's throat. Heyka looked shocked but alive despite the bloody red marks on his chest. It wasn't fair. Not when—

*Jennar.*

His lover lay sprawled on the ground, looking just like a hawk that had dropped from the air, though no mark showed on Jennar's body. Niann scrambled to his side and took Jennar's body in his arms. He didn't move. Didn't breathe. Niann wailed again, a long, ululating cry of grief.

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In the stifling confines of the tent, Heyka fought to gather thoughts that seemed to be running as fast as his own blood. Everything he'd worked a lifetime for, gone in an instant. Shaman and god, powerful beyond measure.

One title, however, did not leave him, and continued to stare at him in the form of Jennar's motionless body.

*Murderer.*

The first death, that of the wandering holy woman, might have been explained as youthful exuberance, an accident when he didn't know his own strength. Jennar's death had been deliberate torture. Fury still raged in Heyka's heart. He *hated* Jennar, and everything about the young man. He'd lied to his tribe and still been accepted by a totem later. Heyka had worked hard to earn the Snake, and for this young man to toy with the gods as he had was unfair. He'd done everything the wrong way—fallen in love with an outsider, lied about having a totem, and ruined all of Heyka's plans.

It *was* too late. Heyka keened his own grief at being so brutally ripped away from the upper world. He couldn't get there again on his own, not without help. And not only was his world gone, but also his totem. Niann's attack had severely wounded the Snake, causing it to go into hiding to heal. Its patronage had been withdrawn, leaving a gaping hole inside Heyka worse than the ones already in his chest. A shaman was nothing without his totem.

And without his totem, he stood no chance of surviving his wounds. They didn't hurt, but he knew enough about how bodies worked to know they were fatal. He rolled onto his side and

laughed.

The sound was enough to rouse Aspen out of his venom-induced stupor. He was deathly pale and breathing rapidly, but he had strength enough to turn his head and regard his Kehani counterpart. "It's not too late... for redemption."

"No shaman can bring back the dead. And I—I am nearly so."

"A god might bring him back." This from Niann, whose tears trailed down his lover's cheeks. The sight sickened Heyka. Niann gestured with his head to include Aspen. "You're a healer. A shaman. Their illness is your doing."

"He deserved it." Heyka let out a bitter laugh. "I would do it again to anyone who dares to take me away from what I am meant to be."

"Even me?" Niann unwound himself from Jennar's limp form. "Even the Holy One you made?" He stood and slowly stripped off the hide dress he'd been wearing. "You loved me, once. Heal him, and I'll give you anything you want."

Heyka stared at Niann, taking in the sight of his bare, unblemished body. The cock was already hard and erect, jutting out as an invitation for Heyka to touch. Fire burned in Heyka's groin. He entertained the thought of touching Niann, using Niann again to reach the upper world.

He turned his head away. It wasn't worth it this time. He'd earned his way above and lost it. "I am not worthy of you, Holy One." A dull ache flared in his chest. Soon, now. Soon.

With effort, Aspen heaved himself up onto one elbow. "Aid me to save him. He trusts me, but I lack the strength."

Heyka forced himself to look at his Deshani counterpart, lying pale and still in the nest of furs. His rival. The man who'd influenced Jennar and led both him and Niann to the truth. "Raven. Shape-changer."

"Healer. As were you, once."

"My messenger should have killed you."

"It still might." Aspen laid back down, chest heaving from exertion.

"Save them. As you did me," Niann pleaded. He'd gone back to Jennar's side to stroke the lifeless cheeks.

Heyka looked from one man to the other. "I have no regrets."

"Were you happy there? As a god?" Aspen asked.

"Immeasurably." The pang of loss hit again. Everything had been perfect. His.

"Must we share in your loss as well, and leave both your tribe and mine with no shamans? Everything you had hoped to do will be in vain."

Conscience panged him at last. A tribe with no healer and no spirit was a hungry, empty tribe. Selfish as he had been, he would not stoop so low as that. The balance must be restored, the Raven returned to his rightful life and the Hawk's wounds mended. He crawled over to the younger shaman's side and held his hands a finger-width above Aspen's chest. Aspen's trance had saved him and kept his soul safe from harm, though the effort had cost him. Heyka drew energy from within himself and sent it flowing into Aspen. A snake had wounded him, and now a Snake, or a former one, must set him to rights.

Heyka let his energy flow unheeded. No totem to assist him this time. The Snake had abandoned him. Whether through weakness or repudiation for his failure, Heyka didn't know. It didn't matter now what happened to him, so he used all of his skill to neutralize the spiritual poison eating away at Aspen's soul. He was strong, this Raven, and had already done a great deal to shield himself. Heyka felt a small measure of respect for the man so much younger than him who had managed to survive such an attack unscathed except for weakness. That, Heyka assisted with as well, sending the young man most of the energy he had left.

When Aspen was well enough to sit up, he motioned for Niann to bring Jennar nearer. Aspen clasped Heyka's hand. "Help me. Undo what you have done. For Niann."

Heyka dared to glance at the face of the young Holy One who'd held such promise, the brown eyes that had once looked upon him with trust and something nearly love. Now they held challenge, and love for the man Heyka had the ability to save.

Jealousy smoldered within him. Niann was *his*, and belonged to no other.

But while he'd possessed Niann's mind and body, he'd never owned the young man's heart, and the realization pained him more deeply than falling from the upper world.

"For Niann," Heyka said, and began. With stolen energy, he helped Aspen repair the soul he'd rent apart in the upper world. Heyka could sense Niann and his gift in the mix, searching for the essence of Hawk that had fled during Heyka's torture.

He and Aspen raced through the spirit worlds, hunting for pieces of Jennar's soul.

Heyka found the last one, a piece that bore Niann's mark on it as well. This Heyka recognized, and had seen it when he'd tended Niann throughout his sickness. This was the one Jennar had given away. If he'd been so careless with it once, then...

*Give it back.*

Stubbornly, Heyka held onto it. Niann. If he'd only been the first to hold him and love him,



none of this would have happened.

*But you weren't.*

With a cry of rage, Heyka let go and let the fragment return to its rightful place.

It was over.

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Niann could only watch and wait while the two shamans worked. He didn't have the ability to follow where they went. The chill of Jennar's body frightened him. His lover was dead, but he wouldn't give up. Not yet. Niann cradled Jennar close, willing the heat of his own body to keep Jennar from slipping away any further.

Aspen looked pale yet serene, while Heyka's body swayed from effort. The wounds on his chest bled freely. Will alone kept the older shaman going. Bit by bit, Niann could sense the fragments of Jennar's soul being returned.

With the soul whole once again, the Hawk had a place to return to. Niann felt its essence return to Jennar's body just as Jennar gasped for breath. Relief flooded through him.

"Jennar? I'm here, Jennar. You're safe." Tears fell unheeded down Niann's cheeks as he stroked Jennar's face.

"Niann." The effort to speak cost him. His smile was full of love before his head lolled. Exhausted, his eyes closed, and he slept, safe in his lover's arms.

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A sense of peace flowed over Heyka as he watched the reunion between the two lovers. The wounds in his chest hurt so much that he could hardly breathe. It didn't matter now. Smiling to himself, Heyka palmed the knife Jennar used for carving and staggered outside.

The slight, ghostly figures of three animals were there to meet him. Deer, Hawk and Raven watched as he collapsed to his knees in the brush and prostrated himself before them. The limp form of a coral snake dangled from the Hawk's beak. The Bright One spoke. *The balance must be restored.*

"Yes," Heyka agreed. He met the eyes of each creature and did not look away. In the end, he would be nothing, as he'd always feared. It was right. He positioned the knife between two of his ribs and thrust the blade into his heart.

## EPILOGUE

Almost two moons after Heyka's death, two horses, three men, and a woman with a belly rounded in pregnancy stood in a clearing many days away from the Kehani camp. Down the smooth slope of a hill they could see the tents of the Deshani camp dotting the landscape like mushrooms. Niann looked at it, almost wishing their journey took him and Jennar there as well. His lover had said many times how accepting and supportive the Deshani had been compared to the Kehani.

"Home," Aspen said, sounding almost wistful. He held the halter to one of the horses, a feisty brown and white paint that flicked its ears at the sounds of a distant herd. The woman sat on its back, looking relieved that their journey had nearly ended. She put a protective hand on her belly and rubbed, as if to comfort the unborn children within.

The remaining horse, a brown mare, bore no riders, because Niann and Jennar had both dismounted to bid the shaman goodbye. They embraced Aspen for one last time. "Thank you. For everything," Niann said, grateful beyond words for the shaman's skills and support.

"It was my duty," Aspen said, and then, with a wink, "and my pleasure. You will always find welcome among the Deshani."

"Thank you, but..." Jennar hugged Niann around the shoulders. "I think we need some time to ourselves for a while. We're looking forward to being alone. Present company excepted, of course."

"Of course," Aspen said with a knowing smile. "May the gods guide your steps."

"And may they guide us together again one day," Jennar returned.

"You'll come in a moon in time to see them born?" the woman asked.

"Of course," Niann said. He felt shy as he addressed her. "We wouldn't miss it."

Aspen gave them a final nod, then led the paint and its rider down the path that would take him toward his own tribe.

Niann hugged Jennar. "We're alone. Now what?" He shivered against Jennar's broad, warm chest, hardly believing that they were here and still alive.

The darkness hadn't vanished immediately upon Heyka's death. Nothing so easy as that. If anything, it felt more like a breath of fresh air after the choking atmosphere of a forest fire had

dissipated, or as if an immeasurably heavy burden had been lifted.

Lifted, but not released. Chaos had erupted outside their tent when Heyka's body was found. The chief had burst in, demanding an explanation, and only Niann's status as the Holy One was enough to make him back down and convince the chief to give them some space and quiet until Jennar and Aspen recovered.

"But it's Jennar's knife!" the chief said.

"And Heyka used it. Not Jennar. Heyka did what the gods asked of him." Niann cradled Jennar's head in his lap. "Do you think he's in any condition to use it? Now leave us. I need to be alone with Jennar and Aspen."

"We need you, too, Holy One. The tribe is in chaos. Please, won't you give us your blessing?"

The words stole over him... but Niann let them pass, shocked at the chief's audacity to ask him such a thing. "No. I will not. You have ill-treated me and my friends for the sake of your own greed. This tribe deserves nothing else from me."

The chief gaped, but had the good sense to leave before he said anything else insulting. Niann let the rage pass before he moved to tend to Aspen. Like Jennar, the shaman had fallen asleep from exhaustion. Niann tucked furs around him and made sure he was comfortable.

A while later, Jennar croaked, "Niann."

"Jennar." Niann stroked his lover's face, relieved to see the lucid expression. "Don't ever do something that stupid again. I need you."

"You protected... me, this time."

"And I would do it again. With my life."

"Not that," Jennar said.

"With my love, then." Niann craned his head down to kiss Jennar. Heat flared in his groin from just that little contact. If only Jennar were well, there were so many things they could do....

Now that Jennar was awake, Niann could voice the desire growing in his heart. "I want to leave, Jennar. We have no place here anymore."

"Where?" Jennar looked puzzled, but not unwilling.

"Anywhere. I just want to be with you, and away from..." He swept his hand in a gesture meant to encompass the camp. "They don't trust us. I can hear them whispering. If I refuse to be the Holy One, I am an outsider yet again, and no fit company for the chief's nephew."

"I will not lose you again. We'll go. Anywhere you want to."

"New lovers," Aspen said in mock disapproval. He lay on his side, still wan from his exertions, but as alive and well as Jennar. "Congratulations. You did it. The gods now sleep to restore themselves."

"But they will return," Jennar said.

"Yes, when they are able," Aspen said. "The gods are neither good nor evil, as men can be. They are what they are, and they lend their abilities to us for a time, but how we use their gifts is up to us."

"Have you ever been tempted to—like Heyka?" Niann asked.

"Many times." Aspen's gaze didn't flinch. "It is human to wish revenge, to strive to right a wrong done to us. But it is nearer to being a god to know when a desire would cause more harm than good. Heyka knew, once, but his greed made him forget."

They pondered that over the next several days. Niann left the tent only to get food and to relieve himself. He moved carefully through the camp, feeling the weight of dismay and suspicion. The only relief came when one of the women offered to bring them food instead.

It was the young Quail woman that came with bowls of stew and an entire pouch full of jerky. She shyly set everything down and put a hand over her bulging belly. "It's the least I can do," she said. "You've given me so much, Holy One."

Gingerly, Niann put his palm on the side of the woman's stomach, and smiled when he felt the movement within.

"They know you," she said.

"They? Twins?" He caught Aspen's eye, and the shaman nodded.

"Only two moons now."

The thought pleased him, but only for a moment. He clasped her hand. "Come with us."

She looked stricken. Her eyes darted from one man to the other. "You're leaving? But where are you going?"

"Away. To be on our own for a while. Please come. I don't want my—" Niann stumbled, and felt Jennar's eyes on him, "*your* children to be raised here and treated as I was."

"With no other women? To have two infants and look after them both?" The brief hope in her expression died. "You have no idea what that would mean. And no one to help me when they come..."

"Then come with me," Aspen said. "You and your children would be welcome. In my tribe, the children are looked after by everyone, and no one is chastised for being an outsider."

"Yes," she said so quickly she seemed to surprise herself. "I will go. I will bring food to you until you are ready to leave, and will prepare enough to make the journey there."

"Good," Aspen said.

Niann stared after her when she left, hardly feeling Jennar's grip on his arm. "They're mine. I know the gods used me to make them—but they're *mine*."

"I can't wait to see them," Jennar said, and pulled Niann close to kiss him. "Anything of yours is precious to me."

Word of their imminent departure reached the chief's ears. He came to the tent uninvited, his face a mask of anger and despair. "He's an outsider," the chief said weakly, when all his arguments failed to convince Jennar to stay. He tossed something into the dust beside Niann. "Go back, then, to wherever you came from."

Niann picked it up. It was a collection of brightly-colored beads tied into a lock of dark hair. His breath caught in his throat as Jennar answered the question he couldn't ask.

"Your mother's," he said. "I remember mine cutting that off in hopes of identifying her if anyone came looking. We might be able to use it to find your true tribe." He turned back to his uncle. "We'll need horses. At least two."

The chief's face purpled with rage. "You are disgraced and banished from the Kehani, and will take none of my stock!"

"So, instead, you'd rather make a cripple and a pregnant woman walk all the way to the Deshani camp?" Jennar sat up, looking fully prepared to take on his uncle despite his weakness.

Niann rested a hand on Jennar's shoulder. "We won't take anything. Heyka collected many gifts for the Holy One in my name." He looked at the chief. "Will those do in trade for two sturdy horses?"

A week later, they were well enough to travel and had two horses packed and waiting. The Quail woman went atop one and Niann on the other, with the crutch strapped securely to the horse's side. Niann couldn't help but feel that the tribe was relieved to see them go. The Kehani came out to watch their departure, most with hurt and confusion in their eyes, several with outright hatred. Muttered epithets followed them out.

"Despoilers of gods."

"Murderers."

Niann turned a deaf ear. None of them had been in the thick of the battle as he and Jennar had. All the Kehani knew was that their revered shaman was dead by Jennar's knife, and that the gods were too far away to touch. They saw only what they wished, and nothing he, Jennar, or Aspen could say would make the least amount of difference.

On the way out of the camp, Yosan called out, "I'll miss you, Cat. No matter what anyone says, you were still the best."

Jennar rolled his eyes. Niann leaned down from his perch on the horse and kissed Jennar. "I'd have to agree with him, you know."

Now, a few days later, they were alone, away from disapproving stares. "Now what?" Niann asked again. He had a few things in mind, if Jennar didn't. Though Aspen certainly wouldn't have minded their lovemaking, Niann had felt guilty about doing it in front of his children, unborn or not.

"I have something for you," Jennar said. The fox charm had long since vanished, lost in one of Heyka's bouts of jealousy. The talisman Jennar presented him with now was exquisite. Carved flat, the image seemed to shift as Niann looked, a hart with a remarkable rack at one glance, at the next the antlers had faded into the forest background and left behind a bare-headed doe.

"It's perfect," Niann said. Jennar took the leather thong and tied it around his lover's neck. The talisman hung just below Niann's collarbone. "When did you have time to do this?"

"While you slept." Jennar kissed him. "Which will you be for me now? Hind or hart?"

"Which do you want?" Niann asked suggestively, nudging his hips against Jennar's.

"Both. Neither." His voice grew husky. "I just want *you*. Here. Now."

"Then hart, I think. There's something I've been wanting to try for a while." He raked his fingers down Jennar's muscled back.

Jennar crowed his happiness to the heavens. As they made love that night, a raven croaked its approval. Above them, the gods rested and gathered their strength, and blessed the two with the peace and love they'd fought so hard for.