

Servant of the Seasons 3: Spring

*A
Torquere
Chaser
by
Lee Benoit*



Spring [Servant of the Seasons 3]
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CONTENTS

[Glossary](#)

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The floods came with no warning save Lys' aggrieved shout right into my ear. The fuss and muddle as Lys and Tywyll tumbled out of bed would have been comical, but for my fear that however solid it was, our sod house wouldn't survive if the river were to misbehave and overflow the two channels we had dug around our home.

I scrambled from bed as soon as my bedfellows righted themselves and we dashed for the door, pausing only to snatch up our clothes and the packs we had prepared days ago. We made our way quickly to the temporary shelter we'd built in anticipation of the flood, and to which we'd moved those things we couldn't readily replace, like my precious supply of metal, or that we couldn't bear to lose, like Lys' loom. The shelter was cramped and cold in the darkness of the early morning.

Lys curled at my side and Tywyll sat between my outstretched legs. We listened tensely and strained our eyes in the direction of the river, though in the pre-dawn gloom we could see nothing. Truth be told, the swollen river was more sound than fury, at least from our side of the berm.

"Shall I make some tea?" I asked, more interested in breaking our silence than in breaking our fast.

Lys nodded against my shoulder but didn't move away. "What if our home is destroyed?"

"Then we will build another," Tywyll said. We had been over and over various contingencies during the last half moon.

"We will stay here, no matter what the floods wreak," I added. "Wish I could see, though." We wouldn't know if our irrigation pond was a success until after the flood waters receded. That wasn't Lys' chief worry, however. I stroked his green hair, grown out into ferny softness. "The trenches should guide the river away from our house." He had worked hard through autumn to improve our dwelling; it was very much his.

"It will be good if the floodwaters reach the fields, vjellja," Tywyll reminded him.

The sky had lightened enough that I could see the trenches we had dug. They curved like dark parentheses around the homestead and led to the field. We were hoping for a rich, silty deposit.

Lys nodded and, with a sigh, rolled away from me, pulling his fire starting kit from his pack. He knelt with one foot on his fireboard, wrapping the bow and setting the drill. He sawed back and forth vigorously, his face intent, and I smelled the wood heating well before the first delicate plume of smoke rose from the notch in the board. Tywyll sat ready with a small twist of dried bean stalk to catch the coal. I measured tea into cups and rummaged around for the last of our honey, relieved to have this homely task to focus on instead of the tense, futile watching of the flood we couldn't see, much less control.

"Flint is faster." I jumped at the voice, and Lys whirled, toppling his drill, bow, and socket. Cynar—for that was the name our Novigi interloper had given—leaned with

exaggerated casualness against one of the lean-to's supports, regarding the three of us with his unsettling gold eyes.

"Kusheri!" Lys gasped. "Warn a fellow, can't you? Now I have to start over."

"I came without stealth," Cynar drawled. I wished, not for the first time in the stranger's company, that I had eyes in the back of my head; though I wasn't convinced I would have noticed his approach in any event.

Tywyll nodded tightly. "We were preoccupied."

"With brewing tea, kusheri?" Cynar gave the word a sneering cant.

"With the flood," I snapped defensively.

Cynar waved his hand dismissively. "Nothing you can do about that. The flood is not the only threat."

"Where have you been, kusheri?" Lys asked, much more kindly than I would have managed. I supposed his sympathy for the Novigi was understandable, but I found, after the initial furor of meeting and mourning died down, that I did not share it. After we'd buried Cyso, his amichu, and outfitted Cynar with clothes and food, he had disappeared. I hadn't even seen evidence of him around our trap lines. I thought he'd gone for good.

"I've been upriver. I knew the flood was coming." He shrugged.

"You came to warn us?" Tywyll sounded as suspicious as I felt.

"If I was in time, yes, I would have. As I wasn't, I thought I'd share these." He unstrapped his pack and let it fall at Tywyll's feet. Tywyll used his foot to shove it in my direction,

and I scooted over to open it, with a wary glance at the shiny pink scars on Tywyll's fingers. I nodded my understanding—any metal that might be inside would burn him, whether meant to harm or not.

"I've been trading."

"With whom?" I wondered.

"With refugees."

"We haven't seen any."

"They're waiting out the thaw. Hidden."

"Like we should be?" I couldn't keep the note of challenge from my voice. Cynar seemed to think anyone who wasn't a land-raping Salter must live underground like a cudo in a burrow or be hunted like one. Our living in the open was the reason he'd given for choosing not to stay with us after burying the Novigi we'd pulled from the river, the one he'd told us was his amichu, his beloved.

"The Salters will move with the thaw. They are slower, of course." Cynar said this last with a curl of his lip and a narrowing of his strange eyes.

I had nothing more to say to him, and so I busied myself with the contents of his pack. Lys was occupied with brewing the tea, having finally gotten a small fire going, and so wasn't prepared when I tossed a thick hank of rough yarn at him. It bounced off his shoulder and nearly landed in the tea water. He huffed and flicked a peat chip at my head, and I grinned, inordinately relieved by the familiarity of the exchange.

Tywyll grunted my name and pointed at the pack. I drew out an odd assortment of old clothing, worn leather scraps, tool handles.

"No metal," I assured him.

"I can't handle it either, domer," Cynar sneered. He spoke Almen as well as I, and though I wondered, I hadn't asked why that was so. Tywyll and Lys had spoken nothing but their native Novigi until flesh traffickers had brought them to the Alm taon where my neighbor Varas had bought them. For Cynar to speak Almen fluently—albeit with the coarse cadences of the taons outside the domes—he must have lived there a long time. As far as I'd been able to surmise, our surly visitor spoke no Novigi at all.

"You wouldn't have to touch it to carry it," I countered.

"You don't have to guard them, you know."

"I do what I must."

"I am no threat."

Tywyll's head popped up and his eyes, which were losing their winter evergreen color, narrowed dangerously. "You are not."

"Tywyll," Lys murmured, almost reproachfully. "The tea is ready." He angled a tentative smile up at Cynar. "You will join us, won't you, kusheri?" Tywyll rolled his eyes at the familiarity of Lys addressing Cynar as 'cousin.'

"I might as well sit a spell." Cynar approached, crouched outside our circle, and accepted a cup from Lys' hand.

"Thank you for the yarn," Lys ventured. I suppressed a flash of annoyance: why was he trying so hard?

"I didn't bring it for you," Cynar grumbled.

"No? Forgive me." Lys passed the tangled mess back to me and I proffered it to Cynar with ill grace. He waved his hand impatiently.

"But as I don't have a use for it..." I passed the bundle back to Lys, who frowned for a moment, then smiled again, if less broadly than the first time.

"Have you no use for any of these things?" I pressed.

"No."

"Then we thank you."

"You speak for them?"

"As they speak for me."

"You are not Novigi."

"And they are not Alm."

Cynar snorted. "You shouldn't let him command you," he barked at Tywyll.

Tywyll raised one pale eyebrow in my direction and growled, "None commands me." He looked away from me, but not before I saw the corner of his mouth twitch with mirth. I was glad of the weak light, for it hid my blush.

Lys began winding the yarn into a more orderly ball, and peered at the pack. "What else is there?"

Unceremoniously, I upended the pack to let the last few contents fall to the ground beside the cookfire. What I saw made me gasp.

"What is it?"

"Books." I hadn't seen one since I left the dome. My traitorous hand reached for one.

"Useless heavy things," Cynar said, but I noticed his eyes were fixed upon the three tomes with what might be curiosity.

"Do you read?" I asked.

"No."

"Then they are useless heavy things indeed." Two of the books were waterlogged beyond recognition, the covers swollen, the pages pulpy, the ink illegible. I sighed, trying to squelch my disappointment.

"Perhaps we can dry the paper out and use it," Tywyll offered with a smile.

I nodded minutely, picked up the third book, and started to laugh.

"Well? What is it, then?" Cynar demanded when it became clear Lys and Tywyll were too bemused by my reaction to say anything.

"True Tales of the Novigi," I said through my hiccoughs.

"Can you read it?" Lys asked.

I lifted the cover gingerly, expecting the same sodden mess as before, only to find the pages mostly dry, if rippled with moisture at the edges. I peeled back the first few pages and found familiar Alm print. "Yes," I said.

"Who would make a book about Novigi?" Tywyll wanted to know.

"I don't know. It must be old. New books are all on silex readers."

"You said you had never heard of the Novigi before meeting us."

"I hadn't."

"Someone knows about us. Enough to write a book," Tywyll mused.

I thought I knew what was bothering him and hastened to reassure. "Paper books, even data-scrolls, are not used anymore. Only a very few people collect them, more as

artifacts than to read. My love of books was the subject of much ridicule. This one is very old, probably forgotten. What is written here of the Novigi poses no danger to you."

"Where did these come from?" Tywyll demanded. We three looked at Cynar.

"How should I know? I took the whole satchel in trade; the only useful things in it were these." He leaned back so we could see his feet. He ground his heels back and forth to show us the battered boots he wore.

"So you carried the rest of this useless stuff back to us?" I really was curious. Cynar didn't strike me as the sort to take on extra work, nor as one to inconvenience himself for anyone. I wondered what he had traded for it.

He shrugged and didn't look up from his mug of tea. "Thought you might find a purpose in some of it. Seem clever enough."

I did not know what to say to that, so I kept quiet.

"Read to us, Mèco!" Lys said.

"Very well, madi, since you waited so patiently." I smiled teasingly and opened the book again, my hands trembling. Tywyll's fingers closed around my wrist, rubbing gently, and I spared him a grateful smile. But immediately I saw he hadn't reached for me to comfort me in my emotional reaction to the book. I followed his gaze.

The river had cleared the berm.

* * * *

By the light of the next day we found we could explore our place without fear of being inundated, though we agreed to

wait until the river shrank before we tried to scale the berm. The turvy stood, thanks to the runoff trenches we'd dug, though we could not discern how deep the water might be on the floor without getting closer than Tywyll allowed. We'd moved most of the contents of the kitchen shed to the lean-to in the field, sacrificing the hearth and our bathing arrangement to the fury of the river.

Cynar had left us as soon as day broke.

Tywyll and Lys secured our collection of volo pipes while I experimented with fashioning rakes to spread the silty mud over our fields. We had not had time to create a network of furrows throughout the fields. Next year we would do so, and the river could perform this labor for us. I smiled to myself and tried a new way of winding avala sinew around volo spikes.

"Something is funny, khari?" Lys called over to me.

I smiled to hear his endearment. "Just thinking of how to take better advantage of the flood next year."

"And this amuses you?" Tywyll asked.

"It delights me to think at this time next year I will still be here with the two of you," I said.

Lys beamed over at me, and Tywyll nodded with his own smile.

"I wish our kusheri felt more as you do," Lys said.

I rolled my eyes. "He wants as little to do with us as possible."

"Perhaps I remind him too much of what he lost," Tywyll said.

"That's the kindest thing you've said about him since we buried Cyso," I said.

"I don't trust him."

"Perhaps he doesn't trust us, either," said Lys. "We don't know anything of the life he had before, all alone among Alm and Salters..." He broke off with a slow shake of his head, and then looked up at me sheepishly. I waved my hand to show I'd taken no offense; I seldom thought of myself as the Alm domer who'd been turfed so long ago.

"He sees the life we have built, vjellja," said Tywyll, addressing his brother. "He cannot imagine the life we endured before we came here."

"Perhaps knowing would help him to trust us?"

"Perhaps, perhaps not."

"We must try, then."

"If he comes back," I said, doubt heavy in my voice.

As if speaking his name conjured the man, Cynar broke at a run through the windbreak to the north of our fields.

"Come!" he shouted. "All of you! Come see!" And with that he disappeared again, his fair hair swinging behind him like a tail.

I exchanged wide-eyed looks with my amichus, and we all took a few steps in the direction Cynar had run.

"It could be he leads us to danger," Tywyll muttered.

"Then why would he run into its arms?" Lys countered.

"Perhaps it is danger for us, but not for him," I said.

Lys resumed walking in Cynar's direction. "He is more wary of everything than we," he said over his shoulder.

"Except traders," I grumbled. But I followed nonetheless.

With a snort, Tywyll followed as well, clapping my back as he passed me. "Lys will go whether we do or not."

As the season progressed I had noticed a new vitality in Lys. "Kirottu springtime energy," I agreed, using the all-purpose Novigi curse, and broke into a jog.

"Better run, khari," Tywyll called back to me.

Our sprint took us headlong to the edge of the brush where we were forced to slow a bit. It was a good thing, too, as I would never have been able to keep my feet when Lys, then Cynar, barreled through the low branches and directly into us.

"They're coming," Cynar panted as I steadied him. "I thought they'd stay straight, but they've turned."

"Who?"

"Run!"

We ran.

I chanced a look over my shoulder when I heard a monstrous crashing in the windbreak. Avala, dozens of them, were stampeding. Their spindly legs pumped and their long necks strained forward in a panicked rush. They were close enough that I could see their eyes rolling. Lys and Tywyll were ahead of me and Cynar, and I redoubled my efforts to outrun the animals.

There was no shelter in the field other than our lean-to, and it was far too flimsy to withstand the onslaught of the galloping beasts.

"Don't stop," I grunted at Cynar. "We'll have to run for the trees on the far side."

He nodded and reached out for me. Momentarily stunned by the gesture, I didn't think but instead grasped his hand, and we ran together over the sucking mud.

The avala made no noise save the pounding of their feet, and the sounds of our breathing were magnified in my ears. And then two other noises filtered in. A few steps ahead of me, Lys was laughing. Laughing, the crazy little imp!

Further away, behind the careening avala, I heard yipping barks, and I knew why the avala were running. "Navdi!" I forced out on a labored breath. The small pack of predators Lys and Tywyll had befriended during the winter was hard on the heels of the shaggy ruminants.

Cynar squeezed my hand. "Like Lys," he panted, sounding as wrung out as I felt. "Sap rising."

I decided, with that tiny part of my brain not devoted to saving my skin, that Cynar had something in common with Tywyll after all. Neither one of them made much sense when he spoke.

We reached the muddy field and were forced to slow a bit, though we were easily able to avoid the sections that had been flooded. We gained the trees just after Lys and Tywyll, and flung ourselves against the far sides of the trunks, catching our breath. Lys was still laughing.

"Madi, you are mad," I accused him, when I could speak.

His feathery green head came up from between his knees, and his purple eyes danced at me. "That was fun! So ... lively!"

Tywyll gave his patient smile and ruffled Lys' hair. "Yours isn't the only sap rising, vjellja."

"We should keep going," Cynar said, "or climb the trees. If they could run through one set of trees, they can run through another."

I curled my body around my tree trunk and risked a look back. We needn't have worried. The avala had caromed directly into the muddiest part of the field, and were up to their knobbed knees in the stuff, picking their way through and bellowing mournfully. The navdi had stopped their yipping and chasing, and were milling around the creatures, keeping them tightly bunched.

"Our brothers' sap is rising as well," Lys chuckled.

"Brothers?" Cynar asked, and then realized Lys meant the navdi. He rolled his eyes. "Brothers! They're just hunting."

"To hunt, they would cut a weak animal from the herd and bring it down. And they wouldn't do it without me," Tywyll said sharply.

"There must be another reason, then," I said.

"Maybe the flood is higher upriver?" Lys suggested.

Cynar snorted. "You think the navdi stampeded the avala to save them from flooding? You are mad."

I bristled at his turning the affectionate gibe against us, but I saw his point. "Maybe there's some other danger upriver," I said.

"Like Salters, you mean?" Tywyll's brow furrowed.

"Or taon folk, hunting," said Cynar.

"Or taon folk, fleeing Salters," Lys' ebullience deflated and he peered around his tree, his palms cupped around his elbows.

"The navdi would run on without the avala if they were fleeing something besides the river. They know they are safe now." Tywyll sounded certain, and I was willing to accept his assessment. I relaxed enough to sit, shifting about until I found a comfortable seat between exposed roots. Lys landed in my lap with an "ooph."

Cynar regarded us with thinly disguised horror. "You let the domer paw your amichu?" He asked Tywyll.

Tywyll rounded on him. "That ... domer freed us from slavery. He welcomed us to this place, and now it is our place. We are able to be amichus—lovers—because of him. You will not insult him in my presence." This last was growled into Cynar's face.

"He lets you stay because you serve ... his purposes," Cynar growled back. "He uses you. He will betray you when it suits him."

I couldn't keep mum. I made to stand, but Lys wriggled his bottom and clasped my neck so that I couldn't stand without difficulty, or without revealing how eagerly my ... purpose wished to serve his. So I settled for shouting from my seat. "You know nothing of me, or our life. Your assumptions prove you a fool!" More quietly, I added, "My life would be forfeit many times over if not for Lys and Tywyll."

"That's what happened to you, isn't it, kusheri?" Lys said gently. Cynar's face hardened and he turned it away from us. "You were betrayed by those who professed to befriend you. It is not so with Mèco. You will see—if you stay. Will you stay?"

Cynar stalked deeper into the woods and disappeared without a backward glance. I looked down at Lys. "Why would you ask him to stay?" I tried to sound curious, but even to my own ears my inflection was resentful.

"He is kusheri, kin—and hurting," Lys said, as if that were obvious and the most logical reason in the world for inviting among us a surly, shifty risk like Cynar.

We sat a while, watching Tywyll pace and the avala mill about. The navdi lay grinning in the afternoon sun, neither threatening the herd nor retreating.

"Getting hungry," Lys announced, lifting his head from my chest.

"I thought you were napping," I said.

He grinned. "I wasn't napping. I was thinking."

"Dare I ask what about?"

His grin widened and he snapped his sharp little teeth at my chin, missing so only his lips grazed me.

"Oh," I said. "Tywyll, someone's randy."

Tywyll halted in his pacing and came over to squat beside us. "Vjellja, are you making Mèco uncomfortable?"

"I hope so," Lys said with a calculated wriggle.

"Do you need love?" Tywyll asked, with what I thought of as his 'Lys smile.'

He shook his head. "Nothing that sweet. I was hoping for some nice hard fucking, since you ask."

"Shall I take you into the woods?"

"You could take me right here."

"Mèco will object."

"He will not."

"He's right here," I reminded them.

"And you are not busy, khari. Make me come." He stretched and rubbed his stomach, pressing against me.

I spluttered. Lys and I were easily affectionate, but had not become lovers as Tywyll and I had during Lys' nagir. Truth be told, Tywyll and I had not made love since Lys had recovered from the lowest point of his annual cycle, at midwinter. I was happy to be close to them, happy, even, to provide relief as I was doing now. But something in me, something broken, I thought, wouldn't permit me to find my own comfort in them.

"At least kiss me."

"You will want more," I sighed.

"Then you will give it to me."

I looked at Tywyll, who chuckled at my discomfiture. "Sap rising," he said simply.

"Tap me," Lys implored, blinking green-lashed purple eyes at me.

I laughed briefly, thinking of the he'eva trees we'd tapped for their sweet, sticky sap, and then set about trying to breathe. "You give me no peace, madi."

"Of course not," he purred. "Kiss me." So I did, and lost myself for long moments in the softness of his mouth, the slickness of his teeth, the sinuous strength of his tongue. Kissing, I was becoming used to. The other, well, still less so. Lys rubbed harder against me.

Before long, I spent myself within my trousers and slumped, gasping, against the tree trunk.

I caught Tywyll's eye and followed his questioning glance toward Lys' lap. He took my hand and laid it with his over Lys' crotch. Together we pressed, and Lys did all the work, humping up and whimpering and spending with a gleeful shout.

Tywyll unfastened his own trousers and Lys dove onto his prick. They had often done this within my sight, but never this close, and never in daylight. I watched, with the scent of Lys' release filling my nose and the sounds of Tywyll holding back and Lys urging him on filling my ears. As Tywyll spent, he went to his knees and I tried to catch him but he landed painfully on my leg.

Lys licked his lips with a smug smile, and then slapped Tywyll's shoulder. "Now my clothes are messy, vjellja, and Mèco's too. Not nice."

Tywyll smiled smugly in his turn as he did up his mostly dry trousers. "I plan ahead, vjellja. You and Mèco are impulsive."

I did my best to look indignant while discreetly wiping off my hand. "I feel I am an innocent victim here. And I'm not impulsive," I said. "I am the least impulsive one of us."

"More's the pity," Tywyll murmured.

"Sap rising, indeed," I muttered, and dozed off, petting Lys' hair.

I woke some time later with both my legs numb from Lys and Tywyll's weight, my bum cold and sore from the ground, and my belly painfully, insistently empty.

"Madi, lomi, wake up," I whispered. "It's getting dark, and I'm hungry."

"Isn't that how we got started in the first place?" Tywyll mumbled without opening his eyes.

"We should try to get back to the lean-to, or even the turvy."

"Don't wake Lys. He'll just want more sex, and I'm wrung dry."

"Poor lomi!" I laughed softly, stroking his ropy hair. "You get him off me, and I'll carry him once my legs wake up."

"Any sign of Cynar?" Tywyll asked as he levered up and helped me shift Lys off my other leg.

"No. I meant to keep an eye open for him, but I slept harder than I intended."

"Poor khari!" Tywyll echoed my words with a wink.

We made our way toward the lean-to, as that was where our food supplies were. The avala herd had spread out somewhat, and the navdi were still about.

"What's going on with them?" I whispered, not wanting to disturb the animals.

"I think the navdi brought us a gift," Tywyll said.

"All these avala are a gift from the navdi?"

"Perhaps," he said as we reached the shelter and he helped me angle my way inside without dropping Lys' sleeping body.

"Are we meant to eat them?"

"Some, the old ones, maybe."

"What else could it be? Can we use them for draft animals?"

Tywyll cocked his head to one side, considering. "We'd have to break them to harness."

That sounded perilous. "What else?"

Lys' voice drifted groggily from the pallet. "Wool."

I looked at Tywyll. "We can't kill all these animals for their pelts!"

Tywyll shook his head. "Shear them."

"What?"

"Take their wool but not their lives. They've been growing it all winter."

"The navdi brought us a herd of avala so we could shear off their coats? I doubt it."

"Maybe they only knew they were providing some service. Or perhaps they stampeded the avala because they feel as Lys does."

I shot him an interrogatory look.

"Sap rising," he said simply.

I grumbled, shrugged, and went to look for something for supper.

* * * *

After a woefully sleepless night in bed beside Lys' spring-feverish libido, I was not a little relieved when he dragged Tywyll, meaninglessly protesting soreness and fatigue, away to the woods after breakfast.

The tottering steps I had taken toward intimacy troubled me, for they brought me close enough to observe and understand something of what I saw, and to touch and kiss and caress, but not close enough to find my true place there. I knew nothing of lovers' dances. I could more easily dread my steps disrupting Lys and Tywyll's rhythm than I could

imagine what new dance we might perform together. Tywyll was clear in his intent to provide me relief and education while I worked it out. Lys was normally the soul of patience and empathy, but the frenetic trajectory his nature traveled in those weeks after his nagir, as the world popped about us in a way it had not during my first, solitary spring in that place, made him blithely insensitive to my hesitancy. I tried not to mind, and indeed it warmed me to think Lys could forget himself so in my presence, but nevertheless, I was grateful for some moments to myself, with no new stimuli to assimilate.

I gathered up the two mud rakes I had made and walked to the bean field. I used one for a while and then the other, comparing their merits and planning improvements as I pulled dark, heavy silt over the sparse topsoil, mixing it in as best I could and pulling out debris the river had coughed up in the flooding.

The day wasn't warm enough to make me sweat, but the labor had me winded by the time the sun was high. Occasionally I stopped to watch the milling avala herd, guarded as it had been since its arrival by two navdi—presumably the third was hunting, though there was a banquet on the hoof directly before them.

"Why haven't they moved on?"

I spun. Cynar.

"You have very quiet feet," I said.

He smirked. "I think you have an unquiet mind."

I shrugged and resumed my raking.

To my astonishment, Cynar took up the other rake and, after turning it over in his hands a few times, began to copy my movements.

We worked without speaking for long minutes, until we reached the end of the field. As we turned to move in the opposite direction, we regarded each other. His yellow gaze was wary, and I could only imagine mine mirrored it.

"Where are your amichus?" Cynar asked. I listened for disrespect or sarcasm on the last word but, hearing none, answered honestly.

"Rutting in the woods. Lys is ... enthusiastic these days."

Instead of laughing bawdily or sneering, as I expected, Cynar looked thoughtful. "You are excluded from their activity?"

"Only by my own design," I said.

"You do not prefer boys? Or perhaps you do not prefer Novigi." His tone baited me, but his eyes were serious upon me and I realized for the first time how young he was. Younger, surely, than Lys and Tywyll; younger than I without doubt.

I returned to my raking without answering and he raked along beside me without pressing the matter. After another turn about the field, I stopped for water, mutely offering some to Cynar.

He drank, wiping his chin with a skinny wrist, and looked at me.

I feared he would delve deeper into my relationship with Lys and Tywyll, or my past, or any number of other things I felt unequal or unwilling to discuss, so I went on the

offensive. "What about you, Cynar? Why are you not as ... eager, as Lys is? You are the bright amichu, are you not?"

Instantly I saw my error—Cynar had survived his amichu, and for the first time I wondered how that might be so; indeed, Lys and Tywyll had said a Novigi rarely survived the death of his amichu. If Lys or Tywyll died (the very thought made my insides cringe) I could not imagine the other going on, much less lusting, whatever the season. I turned resolutely away from the question of what I might do if I were to lose them. And there, in that unbearable thought, sparked the tinder of sympathy. It warmed my face.

"Cynar, I'm sorry," I stammered, holding out a hand—in supplication or surrender, I wasn't sure.

He batted it away and turned, bare feet squelching across the muddy field in the direction of the avala herd.

As I watched him go, Lys and Tywyll burst out of the stand of trees to the south of the bean field, loped up to me, and swallowed me in a hug that brought tears to my eyes.

"Sad, khari?" Lys asked, peering into my eyes.

I started to shake my head, and then amended the shake into a wobbly nod. "What would I do without you?"

"Pfft." Tywyll rolled his eyes, light green now, like daffodil shoots. "Maudlin today, Mèco?"

I opened my mouth to defend myself but Tywyll only laughed and pointed towards Cynar, who was circling the avala herd like the navdi did.

"Our scowling kusheri has something to do with your mood, I think."

I nodded emphatically. "He lost his amichu, and you aren't my amichus, but you're mine, and I got to thinking about losing you." I spread my hands helplessly, willing Tywyll to understand.

It was Lys who spoke next, however, with his slender hand on my shoulder near my neck. My nose tinged at the smell of him: earth and sweat and ... sap.

"Cynar's amichu died, but Cynar survived. I don't know why, for I have never heard of such a thing. But some part of him broke when Cyso passed."

"Maybe some part of him was broken before that, and that's what let him live."

Lys drew in a breath at my cynical surmise, but I stood firm. There was something wrong with our guest.

"I think," said Tywyll, "that we must be patient, and keep him close if we can."

Lys nodded eagerly. "We must help him if we can."

Tywyll nodded, but more grimly. "We must keep him from doing damage."

He didn't say to what or whom this damage might fall, and I didn't ask. I suspected he merely harbored some vague portentous feeling, like I did.

I sighed and said, "I do owe him an apology, if he'll accept it."

I crossed the bean field, grateful I'd left my boots behind in the turvy as I pulled my bare feet out of sucking mud every few steps.

Cynar stood watching the avala intently with his arms crossed and one foot propped on the opposite shin.

"You look like some great water bird," I said, trying for lightness.

"Come to pick me off then?"

"No. I came to apologize. I spoke thoughtlessly."

"You know nothing about me. Your barb didn't sting."

"Well, then," I said, stuck as to how to continue the conversation. "Do you intend to stay?"

Instead of answering, he jutted his chin in the direction of the avala. "You see them?"

I held my tongue.

"Why do they stay?"

"Lys thinks they have some purpose. Tywyll wants to trim off their wool."

"They stay for you?"

"I can't imagine so."

He regarded me with his strange yellow eyes and smiled grimly when I glanced away first.

"You see that one?" He indicated an avala close to the edge of the small herd.

"The lame one?" I watched the animal limp about for a few moments.

"It isn't lame. See its rear leg?"

"It's shorter than the others."

"That fellow isn't the only strange one." He pointed out one, then another and another. I saw that only about half the avala—perhaps a dozen animals—were hale and whole. Some had crooked or malformed limbs, others seemed to be missing one or more of the shell-shaped toenails on their big

padded feet. One or two had only one eye visible or patches of irritated, thickened skin where no wool grew.

"You think maybe they came here for help?"

Cynar shrugged. "How should I know? I lived in taons my whole life."

I took in that bit of information and began informally cataloguing the various anomalies I could see among the avala.

Lost in this contemplation, I didn't notice one of the smaller navdi stalk up until it nudged the back of my knees, making them buckle.

"Kirottu pup," I swore mildly, but I reached down to let him smell my fingers despite my annoyance. The insolent animal licked for a minute, then grinned up at me, pink tongue lolling.

"You don't fear them?" Cynar's voice came from somewhere close behind me. I turned, schooling my face into something other than a navdi-like grin at his timorous reaction.

"They have never given me reason," I replied, then hastened to add, "They're not tame, however. Whenever Tywyll runs with them he comes back all scratched up, sometimes bitten."

"Tywyll runs with them?" Cynar's voice was awed. With his eyes wide and his mouth open, he looked very young, and I abandoned my intention not to ask him about himself.

"How old are you, anyway?"

His pale eyes slid sideways and a dull flush rose across his neck and cheeks. "Nearly a man," he mumbled.

"Only nearly?"

"I thought the nagir would change me. But with Cyso gone, I fear the change will remain incomplete." He looked up at me, as if weighing whether to trust me with more information. Whatever he saw in my face, he continued to speak. "It was my first big sleep. Cyso never had his first. No one knew what to expect..."

He trailed off. I waited, but he didn't speak again. Nor, I noticed, did he walk away. Somehow, this pleased me, and I felt another sudden, unbidden flicker of protective sympathy, as I had in the bean field.

"Come and have some supper. Where have you been sleeping, anyway?"

I turned and walked toward the turvy, forcing myself not to look back to see if Cynar followed. My stomach growled when I saw the curl of smoke from the kitchen fire, and I walked a little faster.

"We have company," I said, under my breath as I entered the kitchen shed. Lys nodded from the bathtub and Tywyll mirrored the acknowledgement from the cookfire—our guest was skittish, and it wouldn't do to make too much of his coming to dine.

Cynar sidled into the kitchen area and slid onto the bench, keeping his feet firmly planted and his thighs tense, as if he might flee at the slightest provocation.

I spoke as if he were not there. "Cynar has noticed something strange about the avala herd."

"Stranger than their staying for no reason?" Tywyll asked.

"Stranger than the navdi herding but not hunting them?" Lys added.

"Many seem not healthy," I said, and started to list the ailments I had observed.

"They seem healthy enough," Cynar broke in with a wince, as if he had promised himself to make us work harder for his opinion but couldn't hold back.

"What do you mean, kusheri?" Lys asked, his full attention focused on the pale Novigi.

Cynar squirmed a little and his eyes flitted around the remains of the cooking shed without alighting anywhere long enough to absorb his surroundings. He was nervous, I thought, or shy; I tamped down another spurt of protectiveness and waited to see what he would say.

"I don't know anything about avalas, but these are simply not ... symmetrical." I smiled at his choice of words; my dormant architect self approved.

We discussed the avalas further without concluding much, except that we could provide them safe haven until they chose to move on. I pulled out a pair of knives and began to experiment with ways to refashion them into shears. All three Novigi gave me a wide berth as I worked with the metal.

Supper was a modest affair of bean stew enlivened with all sorts of green things Lys had discovered. My favorites were the tightly furled spiral heads of young ferns.

I watched Cynar as we ate; he watched Lys and Tywyll feed each other. Their sharing a meal was an arousing dance of fingers and tongues and teeth. I knew I would become hard if I watched. What I hadn't anticipated was becoming

excited by Cynar's reaction. His eyes bounced away and back again, and his bony hips shifted on the bench. That flush I'd first noticed that afternoon was back, bringing with it a sheen of sweat about his temples and upper lip.

I realized how quiet things had gotten when I was startled by the clatter of Lys clearing up. I stood to help, but his errant fingers and roving eyes soon had me making excuses to leave the cramped cooking area. I didn't want to bathe in front of Cynar (or in front of a randy Lys, for that matter) so I left my amichus to their games and offered to show Cynar the irrigation pond.

The sun sat low on the far side of the river, and everything on our side was sunk in a dusk purplish as a new bruise. We could see well enough, and I showed Cynar how we had dug a deep depression against the current, like a comma, that would hold water without needing to be dammed.

"However did you think of such a thing?" He asked, and dark gathered around us as I told him about the majava lodge and described the irrigation system I had planned.

"So many animals live here. No wonder your life is easy," he mused.

I laughed bitterly at the soft note of wonder in his voice, and couldn't resist regaling him with stories of my first few seasons in this place, before the arrival of my amichus. He interjected corresponding horror stories from the taons he had lived in, trying to belittle my suffering or put down my "domer stupidity." Or so I thought until he fell silent for a moment.

"The old people's stories are true, then. How they'd laugh if they could see me now." He laughed, himself, short and bitterly.

"What do you mean?"

"The old folks, some from really far away, they were always saying a pair of amichus could bring life to the deadest place. They expected Cyso and me to do that to our taon. They even told the hierarchs." I set my jaw firmly against the many questions this statement raised. Most of all, I wondered why the leaders of domes would interest themselves in the doings of the wretched folk in the taons.

I looked at the side of his face, and said his name a couple of times, but he wouldn't turn. I wondered if he were crying and was reaching a hand out to offer comfort when his head whipped around to face me. His eyes were blazing and I was momentarily struck dumb. His voice, when he spoke, was a strangled shout.

"Everybody left me alone until Cyso came. Then the old ones started whispering about us. It would have been fine if they had kept silent, or if no one had listened."

I didn't make a sound, fearing even drawing breath would interrupt him.

"They thought they could use us to revive the taon, the fields, the woods. Even the river, they thought we could save ... everything."

"But why would they think that?"

He gave me a look eloquent of "pay attention" and "you're not very bright, are you?" before answering. "Because we were two Novigi kids, the same age, one dark and one light."

"Like Tywyll and Lys."

"Not like them. We weren't born for each other. We had no samana to teach us. We were just friends."

"Not lovers?"

He shook his head. "We might have been, but, well, you know what happened."

He waved his hand in a gesture of futility.

"I know," I assured him. "Even if they didn't know you were ... different because of being Novigi, they would have objected to your pairing with Cyso." No one spoke of men pairing with men in the domes. But no one spoke of men pairing with women, either. Dome-dwellers' suppressed sexualities was not well known outside, but I had learned on my journey to this place that folk in the taons had little tolerance for relationships like Lys and Tywyll's. Bedboys for the wealthy were not unheard of, nor were boy whores such as Lys and Tywyll had been; no male couples lived openly together. I'd have thought a union that wouldn't produce more mouths for a settlement to feed would be encouraged, but my brand of logic explained the reality of the taons about as well as it explained life in the domes; that is to say, not at all. Cautiously, I continued, "I learned after I left the dome where I lived that folk in the taons revile pairings that cannot be productive."

Cynar narrowed those strange eyes at me. "Depends what you intend to produce," he muttered, and stalked away.

I caught up with him at the base of the berm, catching his elbow, which he wrenched from my grasp with something very close to a growl.

"You know," I said, "that you are welcome to stay here, in the turvy, if you like. Lys and Tywyll are very concerned about you, especially Lys. Every time you disappear he frets and watches for you."

"And Tywyll, isn't he jealous of Lys' interest in me?"

"I think he gets enough of Lys' attention these days that jealousy isn't the problem. Tywyll doesn't trust you, because he doesn't know anything about you save what we gathered from the refugees who..." I stuttered to a stop, reluctant to voice the rest of my thought.

"The ones who killed Cyso."

I nodded.

"Why should I stay?"

I shrugged. "Would you rather go home?"

"I have no home, not since Cyso left. They chased me out after I woke from my first nagir. They said Salters had taken an interest, so they'd driven Cyso away. They thought I was dying, because of the big sleep, so when I emerged healthy they had even more reason to fear me."

"No taon withstands much Salter interest," I allowed, remembering the circumstances of Lys and Tywyll's liberation.

My heart squeezed for the youth, my sympathies—and memories of my own turving—well awakened.

"Please come. Talk to them. You don't have to sleep in the turvy, or even stay with us. But I think you should talk to ... your kusheri." I had been about to say "my amichus," but I was still leery of Cynar's prickliness.

"You speak a lot of Novigi."

"A word here and there," I said. "There are a lot of things around here I have no words for, so I let Lys and Tywyll name them."

"You let them?"

"I learn their words, and then I use them. I let myself be taught," I amended, and he seemed satisfied.

"What about your words for them? Those aren't Almen words."

"No," I said. "Those are Novigi words, too. You could say Lys and Tywyll were among the things here that I had no words for, so I asked for some. 'Madi' means 'sweet,' and 'lomi' means 'small and fierce.'"

Cynar almost smiled, I thought. "They call you 'khari.'"

"Dear one," I translated. At his sharp look I added, "Believe me, I didn't choose that one."

When we reached the turvy, I went in ahead of Cynar to find Lys and Tywyll were, to my mild surprise, talking. Granted, they were in the bed, and appeared to be naked, but they were not doing any of the things I had expected to interrupt in order to welcome Cynar.

Two pairs of eyes turned upon us, and then flicked to each other. I could see the effort Tywyll made not to scowl at our guest, and the quelling hand he pressed against Lys' leg under the covers. Cynar might meet Tywyll's mistrust with churlishness, like to like, but I suspected Lys' expansiveness would send him out the door and into the night. I suppressed my own reaction, which was not only sympathetic but, I noticed with consternation, protective.

"Have you come to stay?" Lys inquired carefully.

"Perhaps," he said, taking another tentative step into the room.

"Where have you been staying?"

"In the woods."

"There are dangers there, kusheri."

"And none here?"

I stepped in. "There are dangers, to be sure, but not from us."

"What say you?" Cynar jutted his chin in Tywyll's direction.

Tywyll's countenance darkened, and for a moment, I expected him to make a liar of me.

"I say you tell us what you think is wrong with those avala. That's what we were discussing when you arrived."

"Tea?" Lys offered, still speaking carefully, as if afraid to shatter our fragile peace.

I smiled gratefully at him, and nodded gravely at Tywyll. Then I fetched tea.

* * * *

"Read us another story!"

Lys was fairly bouncing, and Cynar was drumming his feet impatiently. Tywyll rolled his eyes.

"Every one we've had so far has been inaccurate at best," he groused.

"But so funny!" Lys was still bouncing, but now he was on his feet, clearing up our supper.

"Surely there's been some bit of truth to each story," I insisted.

"That was no Novigi wrote that," Tywyll said, pointing an accusing finger at the volume which squatted guiltily in my lap.

"You said no Novigi read or wrote," I said.

"Novigi has no written language," he agreed.

"But perhaps some Novigi learned Alm somewhere?" Cynar ventured.

"Where?" Tywyll's voice was a snide bark. "Your taons? You think that was written by some Novigi who didn't have the good sense and skill to stay hidden?"

I held up my hand. "Enough, lomi. He's just trying to understand." I wasn't about to point out that Tywyll himself had learned Alm during his and Lys' involuntary sojourn in a taon.

Cynar scowled at Tywyll and muttered, "Learned more from that kirottu book than I have from you, kuseri." I had to duck my head to keep Cynar from seeing my amusement at his smattering of Novigi.

Lys clapped his hands sharply. "Stop it, both of you! Some one of Mèco's people gathered these stories, who knows how? It was a long time ago, wasn't it, khari?"

I nodded and took up Lys' thread. "Whatever led to the existence of this book has nothing to do with us, with the way things are. Can't we just let the stories entertain us?"

"Only if we forget they are supposed to be Novigi truths."

"Why not correct the mistakes as we go along?"

"Might as well just tell you all our stories and forget the book, then."

"I would learn them." Cynar's voice was almost a whisper. I looked at Tywyll.

"Importunate kibi," Tywyll muttered, but I saw the corner of his mouth twitch as he passed me with the dirty dishes. The epithet was a harmless one, but I couldn't help glancing over to see if Cynar had noticed it. "Better have your bath now, Mèco," Tywyll declared. "Those two won't give you any peace until you've told them tonight's lie."

"I thought we agreed you were going to tell the story tonight?"

Tywyll's smirk widened into a genuine grin. "Perhaps so, but you'll have to give me a lie to set straight."

I grinned back and headed for the shower pump. We had spent the day penning the avala in a volo stockade. We were ready to begin laying our irrigation poles from the irrigation pond and didn't want the beasts trampling a whole winter's worth of preparation. Besides, I figured they'd be easier to shear if they were contained.

As had become his habit, Cynar disappeared while we bathed, evidently uncomfortable with our splashing and banter and nudity.

He joined us in the turvy in short order, however, clean and damp and smelling faintly of the river. Holding the hem of his shirt close to his bare thighs, he clambered into the sleeping sling he had fashioned from volo and rags tied in intricate knots. I couldn't imagine it was comfortable, but mind, that thought was born deep within my nest of blankets and amichus.

Lys wiggled close, resting his head on my leg, and Tywyll leaned on my shoulder, as if he might suss the errors in the text by force of will alone.

Cynar shifted around a bit and pulled his blanket up to his chin, and I began to read.

"Once upon a time—"

"That's not very specific." Tywyll had said that every time.

"Tywyll!" I batted a rope of his hair off my shoulder. "If you want me to read, let me read."

He made a fluttering motion with his fingers and I continued.

"—in your grandfather's grandfather's infancy—"

Tywyll snorted.

Lys said, "All Novigi tales begin the same way: 'Before the one became two ...'"

"What's that supposed to mean?" Cynar asked from his sling.

"It means there was a time before light and dark were divided as they are now, before we learned balance." Lys' Almen was getting better and better with the addition of Cynar to practice with. We didn't discuss why it was that Cynar spoke even less Novigi than I did; and I didn't dwell on why being trusted to keep one of Cynar's secrets gave me a mildly giddy feeling inside.

Tywyll added, "It means there was chaos. All the best lessons come from chaos."

"I think I'd prefer not to believe that," I said.

"But what could people have to do with balancing light and dark?" Cynar wondered.

"It's a metaphor, isn't it?" I asked.

Tywyll frowned. "I doubt it. Whatever there was before, somehow light and dark became a balance, and the world is the fulcrum."

"And the people?" Cynar persisted.

"The people—that is the Novigi—learned the balance of light and dark, sun and moon, tipping this way and that throughout each year, and they learned to keep that balance."

"What difference would it make if they didn't?" I asked.

Tywyll gave me one of his 'patient' looks. "Remember where you came from, Mèco."

I felt my face heat—how could I forget the domes, where control mattered and balance emphatically did not—but I kept pressing. "So all it means is that the Novigi figured out how to work with the natural world as it was, to maintain the balance that already existed."

Lys shook his head. "They became part of that balance."

"And they reflected it, like silvered glass," Tywyll added.

"Like you two?" Cynar guessed.

I shut my mouth before anyone noticed I was gaping. "You are cosmic balance, writ small? Bright amichu and dark amichu, sharing and exchanging energy through the seasons?" A thought occurred to me. "But what was the fulcrum? Surely not the whole world, not just for two amichus."

"Think about it, Edor," Tywyll said.

His invoking my title set neglected wheels turning. "The home place!" I cried after a moment's thought.

He smiled at me and patted my head in mock condescension.

"You have no home place," Cynar pointed out.

Lys and Tywyll looked indignant—I knew all three of us considered the lands surrounding the turvy to be our home. We had worked hard to make it so, and Lys and Tywyll had blossomed along with the land.

"What's the word for it?" I wanted to know.

"Ikhaya," Lys and Tywyll murmured together.

I chanced a placatory kiss on the nearest head—Tywyll's—which had Lys demanding one of his own. Before our play could progress to the point of driving Cynar out into the night, I cleared my throat and continued reading.

"...a hawk and a boy fell in love."

"Enough!" said Tywyll. "There is only the driest kernel of truth here."

"Then you tell it, vjellja," said Lys, stretching across me to pat Tywyll encouragingly. I put the book aside and began petting Lys' belly.

Tywyll's voice took on the cadenced quality it sometimes did when he spoke Novigi for a long stretch, but he used Alm words Cynar and I could understand.

"Before the one became two, a hawk who was not tame loved a boy who was not a hunter."

"I see the difference," I said at once. Lys stuck his finger in my mouth to silence me.

Tywyll rolled his eyes at us, but continued. "The strength of his love allowed the hawk to take the shape of a man.

Though he had never seen Hawk's wings or talons or beak, the boy knew his lover's hawk nature, and loved him.

"Their loving cheered the sun and wrung joyful tears from the moon.

"From Hawk, Boy learned to watch intently and to execute decisions without remorse. From Boy, Hawk learned to play, to ponder, and to act with childlike impulse.

"It may be that Hawk learned Boy's lessons too well. I will tell you how it happened.

"One day, Hawk was wheeling around the sky, neither hunting nor watching, simply airing his feathers. He saw Boy come out of a woods and into a meadow below him, and his heart leapt at the sight of his love, and he took wing. Awash in his joy and desire, he forgot he wore his hawk shape, and he stooped.

"At the edge of the meadow Boy stood blinking, half blinded by the sun after the gloom of the woods. He did not see Hawk approach, nor did he hear him, for as the littlest child knows a stooping hawk is more silent than the space between breaths.

"All of a sudden, Boy felt sharp talons pierce his arms and a sharp beak tear the flesh of his cheek. He was terrified, and never thought of his own Hawk.

"Hawk tried to beg Boy to stop thrashing about, for his pinions were getting bent, but all Boy heard was the shrieking of an angry raptor. Hawk tried to ease Boy's hurts, but his very kisses drew blood and his caresses tore tender muscle.

"Too late, Hawk pulled away from Boy, first tumbling hard to the ground and then wobbling into the air on a scorching updraft of horror.

"Boy retreated into the woods, where the attacking hawk could not follow, and tended to his wounds. In time they healed, but Boy stayed hidden, sitting on the forest floor and pondering his scars. He wondered why Hawk did not come to him, but neither did he seek his lover out.

"One day, Boy had recovered enough courage to creep to the edge of the woods again. The hawk that had attacked him was sitting in a tree across the meadow. When it spied Boy, it launched into the air and flew toward him. Fearful, Boy darted back into the cover of the trees, turning back to see if the hawk could penetrate the woods. Thus it was that he saw the hawk land in the meadow with mighty back sweeps of its wings, and become his lover.

"His love approached the skirt of the forest and peered. Boy clung tightly to a tree.

"'Boy,' his lover called. 'Love, can you forgive me? I came to you as a hawk, and hurt you. I meant only to love you, but I was careless. From now on I will only caress you with a man's hands.'

"But Boy didn't answer. His anger and fear were spent, and he forgave Hawk with his whole heart, yet he remained hidden.

"Boy melted back into the woods, stealing away from his love. He heard Hawk calling after him, and the sound tore at his heart. But how could he show his lover his scars? As he

passed out of his lover's reach forever, he whispered through tears, 'I love you too much.'"

"What a selfish boy!" Cynar said the moment Tywyll stopped speaking. "So vain."

"No, kusheri," said Lys. "He does not think of himself at all."

"Faithless, then," said Cynar. "To think his Hawk would reject him for a few scars. Scars he caused!"

Lys and Cynar looked at me. "Think of it this way," I said. "Seeing the damage wrought by his true nature would surely destroy Hawk, and Boy couldn't bear it. In hiding, he was selfless. He sacrificed his love to protect his lover."

Tywyll flipped the cover of the Novigi story book back and forth with his fingernail. "Different from the story in here, yes?"

"You tell it well," I said.

Lys said, "You tell it just like our samana used to, vjellja." I thought I saw tears glisten in his flower-petal eyes when he remembered their teacher.

Cynar wrestled himself up from his sling, still scowling. "I still think it's a horrible story," he grumbled, and that was the last we saw of him that night.

* * * *

"Tsst."

I had wandered downriver from the irrigation pond to have a piss.

"Tsst."

I scanned the leaf litter warily, in case of snakes.

"Tsst."

I tucked myself away and turned to walk back to the irrigation pond where Lys and Tywyll were still working.

"Blasted domer!"

Not a snake.

"Cynar," I said. "Where have you been?"

"I have a question."

I waited. He'd been gone several days this time, long enough to miss the itchy, sweaty work of shearing the avalas. I'd known he was nearby, however, because a quarter-share of food was missing each day.

"If I wanted to make a roof, how would I start?"

I pretended this question was the one I'd expected. "What kind of roof?"

"A small one."

"What shape, I mean."

Cynar held his hands with the fingers interlaced and the palms parallel.

"You can bend volo, if you want it to hold a curve, but you have to soak it and heat it over many days. It's easier to make a roof without bending anything."

I held my hands with just the tips of my fingers interlaced and the knuckles rigid. Cynar frowned.

"That way you can lay whatever covering you want over it, except bricks, of course," I explained.

He held his hands over mine for a brief, electric moment, as if committing the shape and structure to memory. Then he nodded gravely, and turned to go.

"Wait!" My voice sounded loud, and I realized I'd been whispering to match Cynar's voice.

He didn't turn around.

That night, Lys and Tywyll went running with the navdi, as they often did. Tywyll had not yet begun to decline towards his midsummer nagir, and Lys was, well, still extremely energetic. They reveled in their wild evenings. Toward morning, I felt Tywyll's chilled form slip into bed beside me.

"Where's Lys?" I whispered against his hair, which was damp with dew on the ends and sweat near the scalp.

"Still out. He'll stay away a while."

"Why?"

"He wants to see how far our lands go. The navdi will show him."

"Will they protect him? Why didn't you go with him? How will he know when he's reached the end of our land?"

Tywyll thrust his cold hands into my armpits and I yelped and rolled so he was under me, then he answered the questions in order.

"Yes. I didn't go because I was getting tired, and Lys sent me home to you. He'll know he's reached out borders when the land shows none of our influence."

"You mean like the avala?"

"Yes, and the fish."

The misshapen avala had probably been so at birth, and the sickly ones with their patchy coats had encountered something foul, well before arriving in the bean field. Since their arrival, we'd seen other strange creatures, like finless fish and birds with split beaks. Tywyll wouldn't hunt them,

and Lys always encouraged them to move on. The animals that were born on our land and lived there, like the cudoes and the navdi, were healthy and strong, as far as I could tell.

I collapsed on top of Tywyll, just to hear him grunt, and he retaliated with a sharp-fingered tickling attack that left me breathless. Shy as I still was of Lys' rampant behavior, I welcomed such affectionate contact with Tywyll. I smiled at him as warmly as I could.

"At least I'll get a full night's sleep with him gone," Tywyll said.

"Don't be so sure, lomi. What if I want you?"

"You can be refused. Lys can't, not these days."

"Will you refuse me?"

He didn't.

* * * *

"Tok, tok, toktoktok."

Warmer days and shorter nights had quickened all manner of green growing things around our place, and those plants seduced the befurred and befeathered (and a plague of bloodletting flying insects, which Tywyll swatted violently and Lys blew gently off his arms and brushed out of his hair with mystic homilies about these mote-sized demons proving our fecundity). Today our visitors were a gaggle of kitoki, and Tywyll had decided their wide, lumbering bodies presented the perfect targets for Lys' and my fledgling hunting skills.

I'd finally carved an ulu for Lys and me, to match the one I'd made for Tywyll at midwinter, and Lys and I were squatting to fit ours with projectiles. Tywyll reloaded his

afoot, never interrupting his steps nor taking his eyes from his prey.

Lys tutted beside me. "They don't even run. I don't know why he has to make such a big show of stalking them." He stood and barreled into the midst of the long-necked fowl, scattering them and flinging his ulu bolt into the ground between two fat retreating bottoms.

Tywyll glared at Lys and growled when Lys tried on his best disarming smile. I could have told him, no one disarmed Tywyll on the hunt.

Lys tried pouting, but that only made me laugh.

"You should try harder, khari," Tywyll said to me. "And you should try smarter, vjellja," he said to Lys.

Lys drew himself up. For all his playfulness, I knew Lys took great pride in his contributions to our survival and prosperity. "I thought they would be easier to hit."

Tywyll spread his arms, the ulu bolt raised majestically in one hand. "Yes, there are many kitoki. And yes, they are slow and stupid." He pointed the butt end of his ulu at his amichu. "But some are better prey than others. You must choose carefully, and then use all your skill. These are not leaping elnis or snarling arzh, no, but neither are they bean pods to pluck and shell at will. You must still hunt them."

I managed to look less frankly amazed than Lys did at Tywyll's unwonted verbosity. "Seems you've given this some thought," I said dryly.

Tywyll pursed his lips at me and used two of his fingers under Lys' chin to shut his gaping mouth. His smirk softened into a smile, and died on a kiss. "Again, yes?"

"One for me?" I murmured as Tywyll passed in the direction the kitoki had taken.

"I'll kiss you when you bag one!" He slapped my bum and capered on.

* * * *

My lips were still swollen from Tywyll's kisses as we approached the windbreak south of the bean field. A brace of kitoki bumped my leg with each step. I'd only taken one, but Lys chivvied me into carrying his for him so he could investigate some edible fungus or chase butterflies or follow a swarm of honeybees; he hadn't been very clear about his direction.

"You have a soft heart, khari," Tywyll said from beside me, his hair passing wild with a fan of striated tail feathers plucked from the three kitoki he had shot.

"Because I carry his bird while he finds my supper?" I tried to look as if I could ever refuse Lys anything.

"You know he's as likely to bring something edible as he is to miss supper watching the cudoes with their kits."

I looked into Tywyll's eyes. As the yellow bled out of them, day by day, they were approaching the blue they'd been when I first met him. Somehow, the intervening months—with their intervening shades—made the familiar color seem exotic.

"You know I'd carry your burden for you, too, don't you?"

He regarded me solemnly, and then smiled wide. "Looking for an excuse to avoid the plucking, khari?" he teased.

I hadn't been, but had decided to let him think so, when we cleared the trees and saw Cynar waving to us from atop the berm.

"More refugees?" Tywyll speculated.

"He doesn't usually involve us," I countered. Cynar had built himself a shelter, like the tipis I had read about and tried to describe to him. His was covered not with hides, but with all manner of material he'd pulled from the river and salvaged from us, so that it had a festive appearance from a distance. It was on the river side of the berm, well upriver from the irrigation pond. Cynar spent his nights there, though he passed more and more of his days with us, working, or trading with refugees who slowed their crafts to investigate the strange structure.

"And he usually keeps the diainav away from us," Tywyll said. As unsettled as outsiders made him, he approved of Cynar's congress with them. It distracted the travelers from anything beyond the riverbank on our side, and brought us some goods in trade.

"Not today," I said, my voice casual only with effort. There was a taller figure beside Cynar, who followed, gesturing animatedly to us as the man descended the berm toward the turvy.

"Kirottu Varas," I muttered as I recognized the rangy form.

"Took him longer than I expected," Tywyll said, more equably than I would have managed.

"At least Lys is away this time." Strong as I knew Lys was, Varas carried a particular threat to his peace of mind, and I would spare him an encounter with the man who had bought

him and treated him worse than an animal. If their lives as whores had been harder on Tywyll, their lives as slaves had been harder on Lys.

I put my free hand out to touch Tywyll's arm. "You could go back into the woods, you know. Pluck these fellows there, out of sight."

Tywyll, to my surprise, gave the suggestion due thought. "No," he said finally. "I would have him see me, as I am now.

I nodded. When Varas had bought him, Tywyll was weak, still recovering from his first nagir. Today he was strong and healthy and flush from a successful hunt. I squeezed his arm, pulled him close enough to kiss, and pressed my lips beside his ear.

I approved of the sentiment. "Let him see my fine, fierce lomi." We kept walking.

"Got yerself a guard dog, eh, Edor lad?" Varas called as soon as I was close enough to hear. Cynar was scowling, and the band of red flush across his nose and cheeks told me he was angry with himself for letting a stranger pass through.

"I'd be careful, if I were you, Varas. Our kibi's teeth are sharp." I had taken to calling Cynar 'pup,' as Tywyll did, but neither of us had offered to translate, and Cynar was too stubborn to ask.

Varas guffawed and clapped my shoulder. I grimaced at the sour smell of him and sidestepped his grasp.

"What brings you here, Varas?"

"Just wanted to see how my closest neighbor was doing. Heck of a flood and all."

"The flood was weeks ago. You came to see what you could take from us."

"Not take, Edor lad—trade." He withdrew a sack of something from his pack basket, handling it as if it were coin instead of seed.

"Grain," he said grandly. "Got me a whole field in it. Gonna have me some bread come autumn. Don't you miss bread, Edor?"

I didn't, actually, but I could see the value of grain. Lys would be delighted.

"What do you want for it?"

"What you got?"

I looked at Tywyll. With a look of unmistakable scorn at Varas, he strode away from us, returning after a few minutes with a small bundle of candles made from avala tallow and a flat basket of spring greens.

Varas looked, then turned his head and spat into the dirt at my feet. "What about one'a them?" He thrust his hand out as if to grab one of the kitoki by its scaly legs. I sidestepped him again. "Ain't seen nothin' like that my side'a the river."

"Miss meat with your bread, do you Varas?" Tywyll sneered.

"Lomi," I whispered, shaking my head. He clenched his fists and jaw, but subsided. I took the basket of greens and the candles back from Varas.

"One bird for one sack of grain seed," I said as decisively as I could. "You want the feathers, too?"

Varas's eyes lit up as he made another snatch for the bird, which this time I let him complete. "Done. What I want the feathers for? You get your boy to clean it for me."

I passed the basket back to Tywyll, who turned on his heel, stalked back to the kitchen shed, and didn't return. "He's not my boy, Varas. The sooner you get that—"

"I don't mind, Edor-pan." I hadn't seen Cynar come up beside me, and I was flummoxed by his form of address, though I supposed he must have learned the proper address of Alm hierarchs in his taon.

Wordlessly, I handed the birds off to him. We walked to the field shed, rebuilt from our lean-to, where we had begun keeping our tools and supplies when the food storage shed became full. There was a hearth there for my metalwork, nothing so grand as a forge, but it would do for hospitality for an unwelcome guest. I gestured Varas to a bench, and then put the seed sack in a clay jar to protect it from birds. Cynar, with a sharp look, stirred up the fire up with a volo prong I'd made, and put on a pan of water. Then he squatted at my feet and began plucking the fattest kitoki, placing the feathers in a basket, under a cloth to prevent them blowing away.

I was gobsmacked by Cynar's meek behavior, but I forced myself to attention when Varas said, "You seem to have come through the winter all right, Edor." He looked around the field sharply, taking in the bean shoots and avala. The navdi were out of sight, which relieved me. A small flock of birds wheeled over the patch of the field Lys had designated for their use. "Looks like this place is coming along just fine. Mebbe I

should'a gave you back the price and kep' one'a them slaves for myself."

My heart gave an unpleasant stutter and I resisted the urge to press my hand over it. "They're not slaves, Varas. This place is theirs as it is mine, and you would do well to remember that."

Varas shrugged and narrowed his eyes at Cynar, who passed us cups of tea and then returned to his submissive posture at my feet. "What about this one, then? I heard one'a their kind got run out of Dall-taon." He lowered his voice and rasped, "Murder."

Cynar's hands still plucked the kitoki, but his shoulders had gone very stiff.

I glared at Varas. He smiled slowly, tea glistening on his livery lips, and sucked his ruined teeth.

"Now I ain't suggesting your ... Kibi here is that same villain, but I imagine some as might want to question him would be ... grateful to know where he is."

I might have been amused that Varas took Cynar's nickname for his true name, if not for the icy lump my tea had become in my gut.

"Please, Edor-pan," Cynar murmured from the floor. "I have done nothing. Your esteemed friend surely realizes this, and will accept my gratitude."

What was the pup on about?

Varas, never having met the pricklier version of Cynar, found his voice first.

"I might could forget I saw anyone at all over here." He rubbed the greasy stubble on his jaw thoughtfully. "If I was properly ... persuaded."

"Now Varas—" I started, but he interrupted me.

"Salters is on the move, and they got more than just their machines this year."

I had known the thaw would bring the threat of Salters, but still, hearing they were moving again chilled me. If Varas had wanted to cement my feelings of dread, he couldn't have found a better way to do it.

Cynar's eyes didn't rise above his work, but I could see them flicking between Varas and me as we spoke.

"What do you mean?"

"The domers have an army. Been impressing folk from the taons all winter."

I couldn't help but look at Cynar, who nodded minutely without looking up.

"What's their purpose?"

"Control the taons, patrol the roads, that sort of thing," Varas said airily.

"And the Salters?"

"Same as always, just going from place to place taking what's most valuable." He took a loud slurp of tea. "Only now they got uniforms." He put heavily sarcastic emphasis on that last word. I knew what it meant.

"So the dome hierarchs have finally managed to collar the Salters?" They'd been trying for years, though the official policy was to ignore them as aggressively as Tywyll did our biting pests.

"I hear it's more of a partnership," Varas said. "The domes was getting dependent on the Salt gangs, and the Salters pressed their advantage."

"But each dome operates independently," I mused aloud, instantly regretting sharing information with Varas.

He grinned, apparently gleeful at my slip. "Not so independent, from what I hear. Them hierarchs got some kind of committee, or something. It's that what's got the army going, and hooked up with the Salters."

"The Salters aren't part of the army?" I asked.

"The Salters is in charge of the army. That's the price the domes paid for protection. Now things is changing a bit outside the domes." He gestured around us, then shot a predatory look at Cynar, whose head was still bent over the kitoki. "There's more folks, all wantin' somethin', and the Salters taking everythin'. Domes still need things from outside, don't they, Edor?"

I knew he wasn't looking for an answer, so I kept quiet. More people surviving outside the domes meant competition for resources the domes couldn't produce inside. I understood more than ever the threat to our thriving little place if the Salters, and now the army, were ever to discover it. I looked at the top of Cynar's head, the knobs of his spine poking through his straw-pale hair. This youth, with his little house of sticks, was our greatest defense. I sighed.

Varas nodded, plunked down his cup, took up his denuded bird, and stood. "Yep, Edor. It's a puzzle. Us unaffiliated folk got to look to our own. Them Salters is liable to roll through

any time now. Them and their army. Won't do to be caught out." He rubbed his filthy, horny hands together.

"Seems to me, Edor-lad, you got lots'a reasons to ... accommodate your neighbor."

I stared at him blankly.

"Anyone coming downriver is gonna see my patch before yours. And ol' Ruki and I ain't living nearly so fat as you and your boys."

I drew breath to protest yet again but Varas held up his hand.

"Could be I could ... redirect any interest, like. But I'd need the proper incentive."

I gripped the seat of my bench to keep my hands from shaking. Fear and anger are such close cousins I couldn't have said which had the upper hand just at that moment.

"What do you want, Varas?" I ground out.

"Well now, boyo, I'm thinkin' your funny little boys have a way with the land around here. Why don't I just take this one off your hands? 'S only fair." His black-nailed fingers closed on the back of Cynar's neck and I leapt to my feet.

"You're insane, Varas. Take your hand off him!"

"Thought you said he weren't no slave, Edor. If he ain't your property, what say do you have? Kibi here'll be happy with me, won't you, boy?"

Throughout this exchange Cynar had remained on the floor, the half-plucked kitoki to one side, on his hands and knees. His knuckles were white.

"He's staying right here, where he belongs." I used my foot to dislodge Varas's hand from Cynar's neck. It was all I could do not to kick him.

Varas straightened and shook his head. "If you can't be neighborly, Edor, then I reckon I can't either. Good luck with the Salters." He shoved Cynar's leg lightly with the toe of his boot. "And good luck with that posse from Dall-taon, too."

"Wait."

Cynar's voice was a harsh whisper, spoken into the floor before his face, but Varas and I heard him well enough.

Cynar rose to a kneeling position and looked at me, then Varas. His unchanging yellow eyes were huge.

"I cannot go with the esteemed Varas-pan because you forbid it, Edor-pan." He paused as if gathering his courage, then tipped his face up and looked Varas directly in the eye. "But perhaps Varas-pan will be ... content, with some other gesture of gratitude?" He dropped his eyes deliberately to the crotch of Varas's grimy trousers.

"Well now!" Varas's face split in a parody of a grin. "Looks like someone around here knows how to negotiate."

"Cy—kibi! No. I will not allow it."

Cynar shot me a look I couldn't interpret. "Will you allow the Salters to take me, take Lys and Tywyll, ruin our place?"

In a flash, I knew what his game was. Varas could be mollified; we could maintain an upper hand in our negotiations with him. I understood, but it made me sick to think of Cynar making the sacrifice he proposed.

"No, kibi," I said again, but I opened my hands to show my acquiescence.

"He says he wants to, Edor, and you say he's free. So step aside and let the boy show his gratitude for my ... forbearance."

In a voice I'd never heard before, Cynar said, "Please, Edor-pan, let the esteemed neighbor stay. You haven't let me have a good fuck in ages, and I can see he needs it." He widened his yellow eyes and bared his sharp, white teeth. He laughed in a knowing way and advanced on his knees toward Varas, leading with his hips.

Varas was already unbuttoning his fly.

My breath was coming in shallow, painful bursts. Cynar had made himself clear, but I feared I had not. I shouldered Varas aside and knelt before Cynar. "Are you sure?"

He regarded me directly and I felt that look deep in my heart.

"Oh, yes, Edor-pan. I am sure. Kibi is looking forward to thanking Varas-pan."

Something flashed in his eyes and he turned to Varas.

"Go on, then, Edor. Give me and my boy some privacy, eh?"

Varas took a step forward, fishing around in his grey linens and leering at the top of Cynar's head. Sickened and ashamed, I turned and stumbled out of the shed.

Before I had taken a step or two, before the warm sunshine could dry the tears at the corners of my eyes, I heard a scream.

I whirled back into the shed, blinking at the dimness, and saw Cynar, still on his knees, his face in Varas's crotch. It was Varas who was screaming, shrieks of agony. His hands were

on Cynar's head and I could see that he was trying to push Cynar away, not hold him still.

With a growl worthy of the fiercest navdi, Cynar shoved himself away from Varas, sprawling on his bum and scrambling to his feet. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and it came away bloody.

"What did you do to him, Varas?" I cried, not understanding the scene before me.

Varas was doubled over, clutching his hairy balls, limp cock flopping from side to side. Through his wails and grimaces he hissed, "Little demon done bit me! Done bit my balls clear off!"

I could see that his balls were intact, but spotted with blood. I turned to Cynar.

"You bit him?"

"Kibi has teeth, so you said."

I didn't even try to suppress my grin.

But Varas had recovered enough to launch himself at Cynar, and I wasn't so far gone with glee that I failed to notice when he pulled a rusty-looking tumi from his boot.

I didn't think. I flung all my weight at Varas, unbalancing him and landing hard on the ground. The shelves shook and rained down pots and bags and tools. All that metal!

"Cynar! Run!"

As Varas and I rolled and grunted, each trying to get the upper hand and control of the knife, I saw Cynar's pale feet flash by on their way to the door.

I fought with little skill and no finesse. I was clumsy and made stupid mistakes. I let Varas get on top of me, and it

was only by fighting dirty that I got him off me before he got the knife in me. I'm ashamed to say I grabbed his bleeding ball sac in my hand and pulled and twisted for all I was worth. Varas howled like he was dying and rolled off me. I rolled in the opposite direction until my hip connected painfully with the hearth stones. Thinking fast, I grabbed one, howling in my turn as the hot stone seared my palm. Varas was staggering towards me on his knees, tumi raised, his eyes wild with fury and pain. He launched himself at me and all I had to do was hold the rock in the path of his head. The stone struck his skull and he slumped to one side. I hit him again for good measure. He guttered like a candle and was out.

I knelt spraddle-legged, panting and shaking, and flung away the stone. A hand reached past me and drew Varas's knife from under his splayed hand.

"Cynar."

He held the knife towards me, holding it gingerly by the handle.

I took it.

"Did I kill him?"

Cynar peered at Varas's prone form. "No. You really are useless, Mèco."

He grinned at me.

I grinned back.

"Do you want to finish him, or can I do it?"

"What? We can't kill him."

"I'll wager I can indeed, Mèco. Is that rock cool enough to touch?"

"No, Cynar, I forbid it. Varas may be filth, but he's a man like us."

"That's a lie and you know it," Cynar retorted. "You're squeamish."

Maybe I was. Maybe my life in the dome had been so sterile I couldn't countenance befouling my hands with murder. Maybe I worried for the fragile balance of our home if I were to bring deliberate death. Maybe part of me wanted Varas to live with the knowledge that he'd been bested by a Novigi youth and a soft dome-dweller. Whatever it was, I stood firm.

"We'll get rid of him. I doubt he'll bother us again." Knowing Varas, the shame of being beaten at his own game would keep him away. That, and fear of my ferocious kibi.

With a tight nod and a muttered, "I hope we don't regret this," Cynar acquiesced.

* * * *

By the time Tywyll returned from the woods that evening towing a very sticky Lys and a lovely pile of honeycomb, Cynar and I had dragged Varas up to the river, tipped him onto his raft, and secured him there with woolen yarn. He would be able to free himself, but not before he had floated well downriver. I spared a thought for old Ruki, but reasoned he was better off without Varas for a few days.

Cynar and I hadn't spoken beyond the necessary while we worked, and I felt the need to say something to him. As we watched Varas float downstream I said, "Quite a double feature."

He let me lever him up and looked at me quizzically.

"You gave two very fine performances this evening, one for me and one for Varas," I clarified as we started up the berm.

He gave one of his eloquent shrugs and made for his tipi.

"Won't you come down for supper?" I called.

He emerged with a small bundle. "I need to bathe first," he said, showing me a small lump of Lys' herb and tallow soap.

"That's one revolting friend you've got."

"Varas is no friend of mine," I said. "He's just the only other person in these parts, or was, when I got here. He helped me enough at first to deserve an ear when he comes around. Until today, that is..."

"You did not want him to take me."

"No." I meant it in both senses, but didn't elaborate. "You were very brave today, Cynar."

He looked at me wryly. "You do not use my special name anymore?"

I wondered at that. "Do you know what 'kibi' means?"

"Something affectionate, like your 'madi' and 'lomi.'"

"Tywyll calls you kibi because you are impulsive and skittish, like a feral puppy."

"A kibi is a wild pup?"

I smiled. "No. A kibi is just a puppy."

"Then it is you who think me feral?"

I was grateful for the gathering dusk, which I hoped hid my burning cheeks.

"You are a bit wild," I hazarded. "Untamed."

"You wish to tame me?"

"Not after today," I said with feeling.

"But before that?"

"Not then, either. I cannot imagine you tame."

His eyes glittered with the last rays of the sun off the river. "Neither can I." His voice sounded a slightly wistful note I was at a loss to interpret. I reached into my shirt for the package I had secreted there as we tidied the field shed. I held it out to him without a word.

He unwrapped it slowly and let the cloth slide to the ground at his feet.

"You made this—"

"Ulu," I provided, nodding.

"For hunting."

"And for protection."

"You made it for me?"

"The rest of us already have one."

"But you made it?" This seemed an important point.

I nodded.

"For me?"

I nodded again.

"So I will be your tame hunting dog?"

"So you will be my brave hunting companion."

"I need that bath," he said, but instead of taking his soap down to the river he headed up to his tipi, opened the flap, and disappeared inside.

I stood dumbly atop the berm and watched him go.

I waited for a long time, and when he still hadn't emerged by the time Lys and Tywyll broke through the tree line with their sweet burden and sweeter laughing voices, I went to join them.

Spring [Servant of the Seasons 3]
by Lee Benoit

* * * *

The day that finally brought the Salters to us began ordinarily enough, with Lys nursing at Tywyll's prick and humping my leg. I kissed each of their tousled heads and rolled out of bed before they were finished, smiling at their activities and thinking of Cynar. 'Thinking about Cynar' had inched its way higher and higher on my daily lists of things to do since our exchange at his tipi the day we sent Varas downriver.

But thinking of Cynar wouldn't help the beans and grain grow, so I carried my thoughts with me to the pile of avala droppings we collected and mixed with soil and plant fiber to make a sort of manure. This day the pile was big enough to load onto a travois and drag to the fields.

Springtime dawns seem to become progressively more golden as they come earlier and earlier, rushing toward summer. This late spring dawn, however, was grey and misty with the remnants of several days' heavy rain, perfect for spreading the avala manure into the damp furrows. I stepped through the stockade we'd built of long, slender volo poles lashed together with river reeds to keep the avala from trampling the irrigation array and the kitoki from eating the bean flowers and green grain heads.

It amazed me that we had such considerations at all. My first cycle of seasons in this place had been so lean that a tiny harvest of stunted beans had thrilled me. Now, thanks to my amichus, we had livestock to worry about and their products to enjoy—Lys was so tickled by my raving about the pleasures

of a fried kitoki egg that I played up my reactions just to please him.

Pleasing Lys was so easy, I reflected. Even Tywyll, sharp as he was, seemed to find joy in me with very little effort. I didn't give my affection for them much thought, though truly it was as much a miracle as fat fowl laying eggs in our dooryard. Convincing Cynar of my merits—and my good intentions—was more challenging, hence my preoccupation. I wanted him to find me worthy, to allow my affection. With that thought, I had traveled as far as was possible from my past in the dome.

Engaging as they were, my thoughts of Cynar couldn't prevent other thoughts from intruding. Each week, as the weather warmed, the river carried to us—and, thankfully more often, past us—more people than I had seen in a year. Sometimes they traded what they had, sometimes they begged for what we had, and most of those who stopped brought news. The Salters, they told us, had billeted in every taon north of Dall, and made their forays more regularly. People seemed, if not content, at least resigned, to their predations, and were alarmingly grateful for the predictability of the raids. The people we saw on the river were, literally, flotsam. They reported that the Salters wouldn't approach the southern taons before midsummer, and when they did, which they inevitably would, these people expected to move on again. I imagined this cycle of incursion and displacement driving refugees all the way to the southern sea; with nowhere left to go, I wondered what would happen then.

I was so thoroughly engaged, my body with fertilizer, my mind with Cynar and Salters, that I didn't notice the man himself approach.

"Mèco, you should come to the river."

I looked up at him and suppressed the urge to grin, lest such an overt and sudden gesture frighten him away. His pale hair was wild around his head, like the corona of a turbulent sun. Layers of fat and muscle had transformed his shape from the gauntness of the winter to something deeply pleasing to look upon. At the moment, his eyes looked smudged, exactly like the sky above us with the sun scrubbing away the morning mist and storm clouds.

"More refugees?" I asked. I pitied anyone unfortunate enough to have been upon the river these last two, stormy days.

Cynar shook his head. "Have you tried the watering array yet today?"

I shook my head in my turn. "The ground is wet enough for now."

"I found several volo pipes floating in the irrigation pond this morning."

I groaned. The volo itself wasn't prone to rot in the water, but they were held together with sinew, which did rot, and sealed with pitch, which became brittle when the water cooled. If the volo slipped free of the berm, we'd have to wait until the heat of late summer lowered the river before fixing them again, and would be back to toting water by hand. I ran my fingers through my hair with a sigh before remembering the muck that covered them. I sighed again.

"We've been lucky so far," I said, "but I was afraid it was only a matter of time." I walked over to the nearest small cistern and raised the lid. Empty. I turned to Cynar.

"Will you help me make the repairs?"

In answer, he started walking toward the river. We stopped at the field shed for more sinew and firewood to heat more pitch. I had failed in my attempts to develop an alternative to either material.

Thus it was that Cynar was upside down in the irrigation pond with me holding his ankles, when a boat drifted into sight. I pulled Cynar up and helped him right himself, earning myself a scowl and a muttered, "I almost had it," before he, too, noticed our guests. He hurried into his shirt and shook his head, doglike, spraying me.

"Hail, strangers!" he called out.

The four men on the boat (for it was truly a boat and not the usual refugees' raft or skiff or shallow-draft barge) stood in a loose knot. Only one seemed occupied in steering the boat, and as they approached we could see and hear an old-fashioned fuel motor mounted in the stern. They hadn't heard Cynar's greeting, and they were headed right to the notch between the irrigation pond and the river. They were not the first to do so, for the irrigation pond acted as a jetty of sorts and kept vessels from drifting away while their passengers did business with Cynar, but they were the first to approach at speed, and I watched with my heart in my mouth as they plowed into the riverbank with a bump that made Cynar and me step wide to keep our feet.

"This big guy botherin' you?" said one man as the pilot cut the motor to a low growl.

I opened my mouth and took a step forward, ready to protest, but Cynar was quicker.

"Not at all, gentlemen," he said expansively, with the widest smile I'd ever seen on him. "We are humble fishers, and lost our net in the breeding pool." He gestured to the irrigation pond and walked toward the men, who had come ashore one by one, leaving the pilot alone on board. There was a looseness to his limbs and a cant to his hips that I'd only seen that day with Varas. I wondered what he was up to.

"I can hold my breath longer than he can—" here he waved his hand towards me and pinned the men with a meaningful look "—so I was the one to dive."

"So where's the net?" one of the men wanted to know. He was not the biggest one, but his garrulousness and air of authority marked him as the leader.

Cynar made a little moue of regret, and I nearly broke character by laughing. "I missed it. You startled us. I'll have to try again later. Get all wet again." He spoke with the aspect of a woman in an old-world celluloid streamer chastising her man for some inconvenience to her. Very put upon, very willing to be mollified.

I was astonished when it worked! The leader took another step toward Cynar—I stiffened—and leered into his face.

"Maybe you'll let us make it up to you, little fella."

Cynar tipped his head to one side, considering. I noticed with alarm his hand was rubbing his belly languidly, from just

below his nipples to just above his groin. I am ashamed to admit I was as mesmerized as the boatman.

"You have things to trade, captain-pan?" Here he smiled hopefully. "News, perhaps?"

"Got a few bits and bobs might interest you," said the man. And then more cautiously, "Not much in the way of news, though."

Cynar shrugged like a coquette. "Then come to my stores and we will trade goods, not information. Leave your boat here; there's nowhere to tie it upriver."

"You got a store?" The man gave an incredulous laugh. "You fellas see a store upriver?"

"Ain't seen nothing but that circus tent back a ways."

Cynar sniffed indignantly. "That, captain-pan, is my home, to which I invite all of you for trade and tea. The stores are there."

The three other men exchanged 'well, it's better than another hour on the river' glances, promised to bring the pilot some tea amid good-natured grumbling, and followed us up the berm and northward toward Cynar's tipi. It was when they debarked that I noticed they were armed—not with knives the way many men in the taons were, but with old-time weapons whose name I knew only from books and rumors: guns.

These were Salters, I was sure of it. Did Cynar know?

As we walked, I noticed that the men carried nothing in the way of trade goods; certainly their weapons would not be on the table. I hoped they didn't intend to offer cash—nothing could be more useless to us, though we heard from other

refugees that more and more taon folk were exchanging notes for goods. Another Salter tactic for getting something for nothing, with the clever illusion of fairness. I tried to catch Cynar's eye, but he was fully engaged in his campaign of misdirection.

"Oh, yes," he was saying, "Edor-pan and I are the only residents of this place." A thoughtful frown for effect, and then, "We scarcely produced enough to get through the winter, though now and again we are blessed with a windfall."

We reached his tipi and Cynar gestured for us to wait outside. After a moment during which I stood in awkward silence facing the three men, he emerged with his tea things and a small carpet I hadn't seen before. I raised my eyebrow at him, but he waved my implied question away.

Our visitors hunkered down and watched while Cynar fixed tea. The two younger ones were less comfortable with the prevailing silence, and one spoke up with a slightly apologetic look at his elders.

"So, you all know old Varas from up the river?"

I nodded cautiously. "He is our neighbor."

So we have Varas to thank for this visit, I thought sourly. These were the wages of my mercy.

"Said there was a farmer here, and a fugitive, and a coupla whores." The young man narrowed his already narrow eyes to shiny little slits. He jerked his chin towards me. "I'm guessin' you're the farmer, what with your size, and that smell." This jibe produced a laugh from the other young man and a quelling look from the leader.

Apparently pleased with himself, he regarded Cynar. "So that either makes you a murderer or a whore." He drew out both ugly words, leering all the while.

Cynar occupied himself with the pouring water over the tea, so I responded. "He is neither. He is the farmer. It pleases Varas to imagine I have a more colorful past than I do."

"So what did you do?" This was the first time since we left the boat that the leader had spoken directly to either of us, and the look he gave me conveyed that he had now concluded his observation of me and that his evaluation did not commend me.

I said, with aggressive casualness, "I was turfed."

"Bugger!" said the other young man, leaving off ogling Cynar, but only for the split second it took to speak the word. I couldn't tell if he admired or reviled me.

Even though Cynar was the one of us who dealt most with strangers, I was surprised when he spoke. "Edor-pan and I are the only ones here, I told you. Varas-pan must have been mistaken." He angled a look at the leader that said clearly as words, Or you were.

The leader grunted and nodded at his men. They finished their tea without further delay and stood as one. Something about the quiet command and the unquestioning compliance gave me pause. In that moment I believed they meant to harm and not simply threaten us.

Cynar seemed oblivious, lost in his playacting. Kirottu pup.

The men sauntered towards the little tipi and the youngest held the flap aside for his fellows. I'd been concentrating so

on reading their faces, the sight of his hand startled me. There, covering the back of it, was a tattoo not unlike the one that had been cut away when I was turfed. But this one bore not the symbol of my dome, but a large 'S' in a lopsided circle. Salters, for sure, then. I had known we would confront them sooner or later, and I felt a strange sense of relief. No more waiting for them to show up, I thought to myself. They walked right in to the tipi. Cynar looked indignant and started forward to confront them.

"No kibi," I whispered. "The turvy."

At once he understood and dashed off away from the river.

I stood outside the tipi, more angry and more nervous with each breath, and waited for the men to come out.

I didn't have to wait long, and their grumbles of dismay preceded them so I was prepared to confront them.

"Where's the rest?" the leader barked.

Dumb farmer, I reminded myself. "Huh?"

"Yer stores, grub, where're they?"

"That's everything." I tried shuffling my feet in a parody of a simple man of the land, but felt ridiculous.

"Living fat, that's what the poor sod up the river said."

"You think we're living fat, now you've seen what we have?" I tried to sound humble, but knew I failed.

"What I see," the leader said, "is too many different goods than two men could produce on yer everyday scrabble plot."

"Varas forgets we live on the river. We trade for what we don't produce." That much was true, and I tried, I really did, to keep the sneer out of my voice.

"You callin' us liars, grub?"

"I'm calling Varas a liar." And you an idiot for listening to him, I added in my mind.

I shouldn't have spared any time for thought. In the time it took to take my next breath, the two young men had closed on me and grabbed my arms. The leader advanced and drove his fist into my stomach. I fought for breath and brought up my tea. Not even the agents who turfed me had beaten me. The relief I'd felt while they were inside the tipi was gone as surely as my breath.

"Little love tap and you puke all over yourself?" The leader showed his disgust by kicking me in the balls. I grunted and would have doubled over but for the hard hands holding me up.

"Least ya didn't piss yerself. Mebbe I should try harder." And he kicked me again. I saw stars and decided passing out would be a welcome change from the rain of blows. I retained consciousness with great regret as fists and feet pummeled me from waist to groin and back again. I watched miserably as those 'S'-stained hands came at me over and over.

My breaths were coming in shallow wheezes and huffing sobs, and pain became a general state of being rather than a cruel surprise.

"Hold!"

At first I thought the leader was calling a halt to the forced march over my body. The way I angled my head, rolling it against the wall of shoulder behind me, presented my jaw to the leader in a way he couldn't resist, and he clipped me with hard knuckles. The whole of events had slipped away from me and I was noticing odd details. The fact that the skin of

his knuckles split when he hit my face gratified me as if I had landed a blow.

"I said hold!" I winced. That voice was loud.

"And who are you, little man?"

At the sight of me sagging there in strange arms, Lys cried out and darted forward. But the leader simply raised his foot and it was as if Lys ran directly into it. His feet left the ground for an instant and he landed heavily, curling in over his stomach.

"Must be one'a them whores," said the goon on my left.

"An' look," said the other, gravelly in my ear, "he's already ass-up for us."

I made a pleading sound and the other laughed, phlegmy and low. "You wanna watch, don't you, grub?" He spat in his hand and rubbed his slimy palm up and down my exposed throat in a perverted parody of intimacy. I fought my gorge again, recovering just in time to see an ulu bolt thud into the man on my right.

Tywyll!

The shaft took him high in the chest, below his clavicle, and the impact thrust him backward. He bellowed and lost his balance, falling, taking me with him. He held me tightly to him as he wheezed and rattled and died. I watched the light go out in his eyes, felt hot wetness as his bladder released all over my leg, and struggled to fight free of his dead weight.

I froze in my struggle when I heard the first shot.

"Idiot!" the leader shouted. "Don't shoot 'em, grab 'em. You heard what the old folks in that last taon said about these little ones!"

I heard, but couldn't see, the sounds of a scuffle as one of the Salters seized Lys. Fear gave me the strength I needed to win free of my captor, his stinking dead weight nearly as effective as his living hold had been.

"Lys!" Tywyll was screaming at a run, ulu poised. I saw his dilemma. The second man was holding Lys with his arms pinned high, his whole front exposed. The man made Lys his shield, and Tywyll had no clear shot.

Lys was screaming imprecations in Novigi. The only words I caught were "do it" and "must" and "now."

Tywyll raised the ulu high for a strike. I resisted hiding my face in my hands.

In old books I have read that time slows in such a crisis, that every detail is drawn out for minute examination. Perhaps my mind's bent is not so literary, for at one moment Lys was in the Salter's arms and in the next he was all-fours on the ground again. I looked around, confused. The Salter lay on the ground next to Lys, an ulu bolt still quivering in his eye socket.

Though there was no danger to me from that bolt, I quailed as if there were and that Tywyll helped Lys up, murmuring in his ear, running his hands lightly up and down his limbs as if to assure himself all of Lys was accounted for.

Their intimate posture reminded me of Cynar. I rose shakily to my feet and scanned the area around the tipi.

"Cynar!" I cried when I saw him. The Salter leader was dragging Cynar with one savage hand, holding the gun on Lys and Tywyll with the other. Blood was smeared over that fist and Cynar's face. I howled with rage and started for him. To

my dismay my guts cramped and I landed on my knees hard enough to hear the crack.

I began to crawl. A shot zipped past. Lys and Tywyll began an ululating wail that split the air. The Salter was bellowing for his pilot. More shots stuttered.

But the only sound I heard clearly was Cynar's voice, calling my name.

"Mèco! Mèco!"

Something streaked across my line of sight and I growled in frustration as the something blocked my way to Cynar.

The streaking shape resolved itself into a navdi, which faced off with the Salter, its teeth bared, the size of its body exaggerated by the upstanding fur of its ruff and hackles.

The Salter shot it as easily as Tywyll shot sleepy kitoki. There was no way I could get any closer without a weapon of my own. Lys and Tywyll each had their ulus, but I'd have to put more distance between myself and the escaping Salter to get to them. No.

I rushed back to the dead man who'd fallen on me, turning my back on Cynar and the Salter to wrench his gun from his limp, cooling hand.

"Tywyll!" I shouted. "Lys! Stop them!"

My amichus were up, making for the Salter in a welter of navdi as the rest of the pack arrived. They gave more of those piercing cries, and the navdi advanced on the Salter.

I could see the pilot pounding his way towards us, and I knew if he reached the embattled Salter captain before I did, Cynar was lost.

I raised the heavy, awkward gun, aimed as best I could at the pilot, and squeezed the trigger, bracing for the bang, the concussion. None came.

I looked at the gun in my hand, trying desperately to slow down my racing thoughts enough to figure out how to make it work. There! A metal tab under the trigger guard. I swiveled it to the opposite position and tried again. Bang! My shot went wild. I started to run towards the Salter and Cynar. I'd never be able to take the pilot before he reached them. It was the leader I needed to hit.

"Kibi! Duck!"

Cynar wasn't able to move much, but he was a great deal smaller than the Salter. The opening he gave be would have to be enough.

I tried, I truly did, to take careful aim the way Tywyll had taught me. But honestly, it was all I could do to stop running toward Cynar. I planted my feet and shot, deliberately high for fear of hitting Cynar.

The Salter yelped as the bullet creased his shoulder. But the monster didn't let go of Cynar. The pilot was closer, and I saw life without Cynar yawn before me.

"Tywyll! The navdi ... the pilot! Please!" I sounded hysterical.

The Salter was holding Cynar across the chest now, was fully shielded. I had missed my chance.

We were in sight of the boat, now, and I could hear the engine growling.

Both Salters were shooting now, aiming for me and the navdi. More fools them, for thinking the two of them could

take all three Novigi. But the leader's shots were off; Cynar was flailing with his feet. His little bare feet, against the Salter's thick boots. Still, his frantic kicking was enough to spoil the Salter's aim. I pressed the advantage, running right up to the Salter and barreling into him. Cynar, clever pup, waited until the moment before impact and then lifted both his feet off the ground, slumping in the man's grasp. We all went down.

"That's the way, khari! No mercy!" Tywyll hollered as he dashed by, ulu releasing with a singing whine. I didn't need to hear the pilot's cry to know he hit his mark; Tywyll's triumphant bellow was enough.

"Fucking grub," the Salter captain growled as he tried to lever me off him. Cynar kneed him in the groin and sat on his belly while I shot him. Point blank, I believe it's called. The moment blood blossomed on the man's temple, I flung the gun away and collapsed, sobbing and clutching at Cynar.

A hand gripped the back of my neck and I whirled, teeth bared, before I realized it was Lys, holding his side and smiling wanly, his ulu gripped in a white-knuckled hand.

"I could have lost you," I said, trying to return his smile. The look on his face told me it came across as a grimace.

Tywyll and the remaining navdi crouched beside us, the navdi sniffing and licking, checking to make sure we were whole.

"Mèco, Mèco, Mèco," Cynar was chanting in my ear, and I turned away from my amichus and their navdi to hold him. Was it less than an hour ago I'd been in the bean field wondering how to tell him I wanted him to love me?

Through his desperate repetitions of my name, I heard Tywyll's voice, not shaky in the least. "Well, khari, there are probably easier ways to acquire a boat."

Amid Lys' shocked gasp and the navdis' high whines, I shared my first kiss with Cynar.

It tasted of blood and fear. It also tasted of hope.

* * * *

"I have to leave."

Lys' voice had a plaintive note that pulled at my heart, but I was resolute and only grunted. I watched Tywyll and Cynar heft another smooth, flat river stone onto the cairn they were raising for the fallen navdi. I was exempt from the building because of the beating I'd taken. Lys had rubbed me—and I him—with some smelly salve he'd made, but the bruises all over my trunk were still impressive, and painful.

Equally impressive—and equally painful—was the content of our conversation. Lys had it in his head to leave with the navdi. It was incredible.

"And you know why." I resisted sighing with relief when I realized Lys was no longer talking to me, but to Tywyll, in that sharp tone he only turned on his amichu.

When Tywyll didn't answer right away I raised my head and caught Cynar's eyes. As used as I had become to watching Lys and Tywyll's eyes change with the seasons, the pale constancy of his was reassuring. Just at that moment they looked confused. I wanted to lick the little cleft his frown had dug between his fine brows.

Tywyll set stone upon stone, and still hadn't said a word.

I decided enough was enough.

I went and sat beside Lys on the riverbank, the swells of early spring having receded enough so that he could swing his legs and not wet his feet. I enjoyed the cool rush over my toes and reached for his hand.

"Will you tell me why you must go?"

"Poor Mèco," he said. "You wouldn't understand, would you?" He gave a little laugh, but there was no humor in it. "I barely understand, myself."

Then stay with us! I wanted to cry out and put my arms around him and prevent him from leaving.

Something of that feeling must have showed in my eyes, because Lys put his arms around me and rested his forehead on my shoulder.

"Poor Mèco," he said again. "I will come back."

"So many things could hurt you."

"It is more difficult to die in summer."

"But not impossible."

"Would you rather I went?" That was Tywyll, lowering himself beside me and tugging Cynar to sit beside him. Cynar angled a decidedly uncomfortable look at me around Tywyll; despite his nickname, he was skittish in our puppy piles.

"I don't know why either of you has to go," I mumbled. I hadn't felt like this since the turfing order came down.

Lys pointed to the cairn.

"Brother navdi gave his life protecting Ikhaya—"

"Who's this Ikhaya?" Cynar broke in.

Tywyll waved his hand between us, looking frustrated with the whole conversation. "We all are Ikhaya."

I was about to say that that wasn't a very helpful definition when Lys sighed and said, "Ikhaya is the place one completes; the place that completes one. It is this place."

"Home, you mean?" asked Cynar.

"The highest order of 'home,'" Tywyll added.

"A place fed by amichus," said Cynar.

"So you see," said Lys, "that I must go and take the place of the fallen leader of the navdi. Just for a while. They have kibi that will not survive if there is no protector."

"But you will be back," I insisted.

Lys looked me full in the eyes and my belly tightened, low down.

"I will be back. When the cycle is secure."

"Meaning...?" prompted Cynar.

"Meaning when Ikhaya's newest predators are sure to survive. When the balance of this place is assured."

"No later than midsummer," I added.

Tywyll stiffened at that. He had been reluctant, but supportive of Lys going, but now I saw he was afraid. Not of Lys being hurt or dying or even being unable to perform his task, but for himself. And in a flash I understood why Lys must go and not Tywyll. Lys was the stronger amichu right now, still ascendant. Tywyll was waning, and he was scared he would sleep alone come midsummer.

"You will be back in time for Tywyll's nagir." Again I made it a statement.

"Forceful khari," Lys said, and I smiled to see the light dance off the river and into his mostly blue eyes. He was

teasing me, but I was dead serious. He relented. "Of course I will be back in time."

Tywyll stood jerkily, the time for explanations over. He wound his hand in Lys feathery daffodil-colored hair and tugged gently. When the two stood close, I saw that their coloring was much more alike than it had been since I first noticed their changes. Was autumn only a few months past? It seemed an eternity and a flash, both.

Lys shook him off, but kept a hand on his shin as he leaned over to kiss me. I took that kiss like it was the last water in a drought, and I wrapped my arms around his shoulders, so much sleeker than they had been when he had stumbled into my miserable life.

"Oh, madi. Come back to us. Come back soon."

"Take care of our lomi," Lys whispered into my ear breathily enough to make me shiver.

He reached out with his toe and nudged Cynar. "Take care of him, too."

"I don't need—" Cynar began, but I cut him off.

"Only if he agrees to look after me, too." For once, I had stunned Cynar into silence, and Lys beamed and laughed and gave me one more squeeze. It was not the last embrace I would have of him, I told myself firmly, and tried to make my eyes suck their tears back in.

Still chuckling, Lys stood, and Tywyll towed him toward the far side of the bean field with what might generously be described as unseemly haste.

Cynar and I stood dumbly, avoiding each others' eyes, as Lys and Tywyll disappeared into the twilight, their bright yellow hair the last thing to vanish in the gathering gloom.

At last I turned and began walking back toward Cynar's tipi, thinking to help him salvage something from the destruction there. I wasn't anticipating his hand on my shoulder, so when it fell there, I jumped.

"No" he said softly.

It was too dark for him to see my quizzical expression, but he answered it anyway.

"The navdi are there. They will join Lys later."

I understood. The navdi would make short work of the corpses, or would call scavengers from the woods or sky for the purpose. We should not interfere, or even approach.

"Is there nothing you want?"

I saw the shine of his eyes wink on and off like a lamp and smiled to picture him blinking as he thought.

"What are you thinking?" I asked, letting the smile travel on my voice.

"Perhaps I am thinking of nothing." He put the lie to his words immediately by winding his fingers shyly with mine.

"Your mind is never quiet," I countered. But still he said nothing. I decided to venture more. I used our joined hands to tug him close, the memory of our one kiss hot in my memory and electric in my body.

"I think you should come shelter with me in the turvy." The invitation felt momentous, though of course he'd been there before. Asking him to shelter with me was the difference.

Cynar made an indeterminate noise in the back of his throat and set off down the berm. Pulled along by our clasped hands, I followed.

* * * *

As we approached the turvy I thought of the hearth, which would be cold, and the bathing water which would not have time to heat before exhaustion dragged me to my bed, stinking and aching.

My feet slowed.

I thought of our big bed, bereft of Lys for who knew how long, and of Tywyll for at least tonight while they made their farewells, and my steps dragged more heavily. Much as I wanted him, elated as I was to be with him, I was inhibited. Lys and Tywyll had battered through my reticence with exuberance, but Cynar had pierced my last defenses. His grief, fear, doubt, and loneliness met mine, matched them. Together, we bid fair to eliminate them all.

"Are you hungry?" I asked Cynar. To be forced to bustle about serving a guest would restore my sense that some things had not changed. Everything felt broken open like ripe fruit dashed against a stone—broken, but promising bliss.

"I don't think I could swallow a thing." His reply made me think of Lys, who would have freighted that statement with playful lust. I already missed him.

"Something warm, then? I feel so cold." The homely ritual of brewing tea would make me easier, I thought. Easier about being so emphatically alone with Cynar. That thought stopped

my in my tracks, and Cynar, characteristically, misinterpreted.

"You are injured. Exhausted. Shall I help you?"

I shook my head, knowing he couldn't see it in the falling dark but mistrustful of what I might say if I spoke aloud.

Cynar squeezed my hand tighter, communicating his readiness to catch me if I fell. In that moment I was flooded with the possibility, his permission, to fall, to be caught. An act of will kept me upright and propelled me forward. I would fall when it would not burden him.

We made the turvy as the moon peeked above the eastern trees.

"I'll make tea. Where's that wound salve of Lys'?"

I blinked in the darkness of the turvy, unable to quite remember pushing open the door and gaining the bed.

"You're in pain. A fool could see it."

"You're no fool," I managed to mumble.

Cynar snorted. "Well, then?"

Ah. The salve. "In the kitchen, by the lamp oil. Jar."

The door opened again and stayed that way, letting in a thin trickle of moonlight. I fixed my gaze on it, and the next I knew Cynar was rolling me onto my back and helping me sit up. I groaned a protest, giving voice to each and every muscle of my pummeled torso.

"Tea."

There was a fire, and I wanted to get closer to its dry warmth. I felt clammy, though the night was warm enough.

Cynar wrapped my hand around a steaming mug. When he took his hand away and the mug wobbled, his hand came

back, and a sigh, I feared of exasperation, tickled the hair at my temple.

"Sorry," I slurred.

"Drink."

We sat together on the edge of the bed for a long time, sharing the tea and the warmth of the fire.

"Better?" Cynar asked.

"Mmmm," I managed.

"Need to piss?"

I shook my head.

"Then lie down."

I tried to roll onto my stomach, but the bruises were too raw to take my weight. I grunted and tried to roll back but was too weak.

"Think your ribs are cracked?"

"I don't know. Never been hit like that before."

"Lucky you."

I wanted to ask who had hit him like that, but before I could I felt pillows pressing against my belly and chest.

"Lean forward."

Relief. My hip and shoulder were relatively unscathed, and the bolster Cynar had devised left my weight on them and not my aching back or pulpy front. I sighed gratefully and snuggled fractionally into the pillows.

"You're not hurt?" I mumbled.

"Only my pride," he replied. "A man should be able to protect his home, the ones he—"

Curious as that aborted statement made me, I said nothing.

The tea had worked its way through my gut by then and I was feeling measurably more human, awake enough that when Cynar's hands began to spread salve over my back and sides under my shirt I was acutely aware of them. By the time he had worked his way over every bruise within reach, including those over my kidneys, I was hard as I could be, which is to say about halfway. I wondered if Cynar would notice. I wondered that I didn't feel embarrassed. The effect of all those months with Lys' unbridled desires evidently came to fruition on the one night I was least fit to enjoy it.

"Piss hard?" Cynar's voice lilted with amusement.

"Not entirely." See what he'd make of that, then.

"I see that." Now the voice was sardonic. "Get you up, shall we?"

"You said that on purpose," I accused.

"If I did?"

"You've melted the fight right out of me."

"Fair fights are for fools."

I wriggled against my bolster. All this talk of pissing, not to mention a full mug of tea, was having its way with my bladder.

"Don't suppose you'd let me piss in a pot?" I ventured.

"Revolting. Up you get."

Cynar's words and manner didn't match. Rough and gentle, they were, and I found my wounds barely twinging as we made our way out of the turvy, to the privy and back. Cynar's hands never left me, and when I lay curled against my bolsters again, they remained.

"I will never be an amichu," Cynar said to the fire.

"You acted like one today." The walk to and from the privy, and the half-hard that persisted after I relieved my bladder, rendered me more awake than I had been before the salving.

"But you see how Lys and Tywyll are. So ... complete."

I heard what he left unsaid—that they were even now forcing themselves apart, shattering that completeness, for our sake.

When I said nothing, he continued. "If I could, I would be your amichu."

I had to concentrate very hard not to let him see how his words surprised me.

"You scarcely tolerate me," I scoffed as gently as I could. "And anyway, I am not Novigi. There is no way I could ever be anyone's amichu."

Cynar's hands had stilled, but still rested heavily on my arm. Their warmth seeped into me, more acutely than the diffuse heat of the fire.

It seemed more than natural to turn when Cynar leaned down, to let the kiss he'd meant to lay on my shoulder fall on my chin instead.

From there it took only a slight tilt of my head to find his lips on mine.

"Ah, ah," I sighed.

"I hurt you," Cynar slid away, sounding guilty.

"Only if you don't do that again," I insisted.

The second kiss was less accidental, and its deliberateness was exciting. Cynar clambered over me, careful of his weight on my bruised body, and stretched out beside me, wiggling until he fit.

We kissed and rubbed until we came, right in our filthy clothes.

"Not what I imagined."

"We'll be cleaner next time," I assured him.

"Next time," he said meditatively.

Suddenly alarmed, I stammered, "Um, well. This wasn't just ... Was it?"

He put all four fingers over my mouth and petted my chin with his thumb. That clumsy gesture soothed me, gave me hope. "It was ... I was ... surprised, that's all. It's not how I planned ... Oh!"

I couldn't help it. I started to chuckle. "You planned? Oh, Cynar, really?" If my ribs hadn't been screeching with each breath I would have been swept away on gales of laughter.

He glared and cuffed my ear.

"Hey! That was the only place on me that didn't hurt!"

He stilled, those funny pale brows of his knitting into an orange line in the firelight. "I hurt you?"

"No, silly kibi. Honestly." I reached over and drew him closer, tilting my hips to mash softly against his. "I'm all right. Really."

"You were laughing at me."

"Only with delight. I ... planned, too." That confession was the least I could offer.

"That's all right, then."

"Is it?" I was still on the verge of laughing, and I knew he could feel the quivers in my belly. I hoped he took them for flutters of nerves or excitement instead of mirth.

The serious look he gave me sobered me a little way. "But if I cannot be your amichu, then what?"

I took a deep breath. "You shall be my best beloved. My ... muliañ. I asked Tywyll for the word."

"Probably means slimy piglet or something worse," he grumbled.

"No, kibi," I used the nickname to needle him. "It's the word for lovers who aren't amichus. I asked Tywyll what it meant and he blushed."

"Tywyll doesn't blush."

"That's what I thought, too."

I cupped Cynar's chin in my hand and he looked up at me, firelit eyes wide. "You were planning."

"I was. Can we sleep now?"

Much later, when Tywyll returned alone, looking as grey as the dawn light, he found us as sleep had taken us, Cynar's head tucked under my chin, his breath tickling my neck. I woke just enough to shift my stiff muscles and guide Tywyll how to lie without hurting me. To my surprise, Cynar, without even opening his eyes, shuffled back, making space for Tywyll between us.

As we warmed his cold body between ours and I drifted back to sleep, I heard Cynar's voice, low under Tywyll's mournful little mewls and shivers, soothing to sleep another Novigi who had lost his mate.

Glossary

Novigi terms amichu beloved; special name for partners in symbiotic relationship with their land avala long-necked ruminant cudo long-eared, burrow-dwelling rodent diainav outsider, stranger; non-Novigi gaeren bog-ripened berries he'eva deciduous, sap-bearing tree ihansi black and white migratory fowl

ikhaya home; especially the land and life for which a pair of amichus are stewards khari dear one; Lys and Tywyll's nickname for Edor kibi puppy; Mèco, Lys, and Tywyll's nickname for Cynar kirottu all-purpose curse kitoki woodland fowl kuseri cousin; catch-all kinship term lomi small and fierce; Mèco's nickname for Tywyll madi sweet; Mèco's nickname for Lys

majava flat-tailed, river-dwelling rodent muliañ best beloved; endearment for those who are not amichus nagir lowest ebb in an amichu's annual cycle navdi canine predator samana traditional healer, teacher, and mediator between the visible and invisible worlds ulu tool for throwing weighted projectiles from a cupped shaft vjellja brother; Lys and Tywyll's nickname for each other volo giant, fast-growing, hollow-stemmed, woody grass

nyma feline predator elni migratory ruminant arzh aggressive rodent

Almen terms dome fully enclosed settlement housing small populations of privileged Alm

Edor builder; Mèco's occupational designation—pan suffix, signifies respect

Salter member of quasi-military gangs that terrorize the taons
silex data storage medium taon human settlement
outside the domes turfing forcible ejection from a dome turvy
sod dwelling ucha ungulent, domesticated for meat, milk, and wool

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