

*Servant of the Seasons 4: Summer*

*A  
Torquere  
Chaser  
by  
Lee Benoit*



Summer [Servant of the Seasons 4]  
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**Torquere Press**

[www.torquerepress.com](http://www.torquerepress.com)

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First published in [www.torquerepress.com](http://www.torquerepress.com), 2008

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I laid the final volo pole on the platform I was building in the crotch of the tallest tree on our side of the river, pulled hard on the last avala-sinew fastening, and started to roll out the wool covering I'd made to soften the new perch.

Creaks on the ladder announced Cynar a moment before his raggedy pale hair came into view.

"I may not miss Lys' embarrassingly vocal lovemaking," he said, surveying my handiwork with a rakish grin. "But I definitely miss his skill with a loom."

I extended my hand to help him over the edge of the platform, swatting his head as he rolled past me to lie flat on his back. He grinned up at me loopily, forcing me to look harder into his eyes. Cynar didn't change with the seasons as dramatically as Lys and Tywyll did—with them, the changes were almost daily, once I knew what to look for—but he was different. His skin tawnier (but then, so was mine), his hair bleached by the sun: these could be attributed to the season and not—necessarily—to his Novigi ancestry. His eyes had been a goldish green, like fish scales, when we first met. Now, they were the same gray as wet river stones, black in the gloom of the turvy, silvery in the filtered light of our tree house. Looking into them now, I realized something else.

"You're intoxicated!"

"I'm never," he groused, and rolled over the platform toward me, coming to rest his head on my outstretched thigh.

I petted his hair, picking out burrs and bits of bean leaf, worrying at the knots I found. He responded by stretching languorously and blinking up at me, distracting me for the

moment it took for his hand to dart into the vee of my legs and deal my balls a sharp squeeze.

"What was that for?" I yelped, rolling over to pin him to the lumpy rug with my greater weight.

"For smacking me when I arrived," he replied equably. "You should be nicer, Mèco."

I snorted. "Your judgment's impaired, kibi." Though we had declared for each other as *muliañ*—lovers—before Lys left to act as steward for the *navdi*, I retained my original nickname for him as he retained the wild puppy nature of our earliest meetings.

I peered into his face again, his glazed eyes and sloppy smile confirming my suspicions. "Where did you find..." I trailed off, having only experienced the synthetic distillates in the domes and the occasional murky ale in *taons* along my miserable journey to this place.

"Something to drink besides tea?" He cocked a pale golden eyebrow at me.

"Something you traded for?" I guessed. After our fateful battle with the *Salters* in the spring, *Cynar's* diversionary trading with refugees along the river had changed course, become more furtive, more cautiously opportunistic. He was more determined than ever to assess threats before they reached us, and had become adept at evading chary encounters where possible. Still, such an encounter was the only source I could imagine for whatever had *Cynar* undulating beneath me as sluggishly and mesmerizingly as the river below our perch.

"I watch the birds and beasts, you know," he informed me loftily. "Have you ever seen the cudoes after they eat fallen bramble berries?" He made floppy hopping motions with his hips and shoulders, bringing a laugh to my throat and a rush of blood to my groin.

"You ate fallen berries?" I asked. Fermentation was not something I knew how to control, the way Lys did with bread.

Cynar shook his head. "Nah, I put fresh berries in a sealed jar and waited," he announced in a confidential whisper. "It was an experiment!"

I shook my head in mock disapproval and leaned down to kiss him. When he responded, I could smell the concoction on his breath, taste its sharpness.

I leaned back to rest against the tree's trunk, played with Cynar's hair, and listened to the summer afternoon.

Cynar had decided not to rebuild the tipi the Salters had destroyed. So many things had changed that day, and Tywyll had been so rootless since, that I felt guilty exulting in the change that made me happiest. Cynar had not spent a night away from the turvy since Lys had left us to run with the navdi and make sure their litters of fragile young survived to wean and hunt on their own. Tywyll assured us Ikhaya—our home place—had enough resources to support the predators we had seen and many more besides.

We had news of Lys, for Tywyll vanished every few days to be with him. But his work was needed in the fields—in truth so was Lys'—if Ikhaya's humans were to be replete and safe through the coming winter.

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The sluggish air rolling off the river, the evening chitterings of the small reptiles, the fisted blooms along the riverbank, all belied the coming winter, but Tywyll was declining towards his nagir, and we'd already seen flights of black and white ihansi fowl migrating southward. As Tywyll went, so did the year. There was much work to do. Autumn would come and the harvest, and then winter. Most river traffic would stop, leaving us relatively safe to cozy up in the turvy, all of us together. I smiled at the thought of these rewards once the hard labor of summer and autumn were complete.

For now, though, Cynar believed—and I agreed—that vigilance was necessary, hence the tree top platform laid with its nobbly weavings I had made in Lys' absence. I smiled to think of how my sweet madi would laugh at my effort, and felt a pang at the thought of the kiss he'd surely give me to soothe my distress at such a poor showing in the textile arts.

For another reason besides safety I was pleased with the platform. Cynar and I were there alone, unobserved, in a place solely of our own devising. The turvy was home for all of us—and Lys' absence hung as heavy there as the air over the river. Cynar and I did our best to alleviate Tywyll's sadness—and between our attentions and his visits to Lys, he was managing.

Less well was I managing my deepening bond with Cynar. With the hard work and tight fellowship of farming, his hard attitude had softened, but only so far as Ikhaya and its inhabitants were concerned. He had a particular affinity for the river, caught fish when Tywyll and I brought up only

empty nets; found water-dwelling edible plants, discovered clutches of eggs to nurture, reeds to weave or plait into rope.

We were all mindful that some threats came armed with more than we could withstand. Hence the platform, and with it the solitude it afforded. If I looked forward to the coming winter, it was in an abstract way, knowing it would come eventually. I'd been looking forward to finishing the tree house with a much more specific expectation. Though we needed it as a watchtower of sorts for the defense of Ikhaya, it was also my gift to Cynar, my chance to demonstrate to him what he meant to me, to honor his desire for solitude, to bid to share in it sometimes.

But here it was, all finished, and here he was, drunk, of all things!

While I sat considering how to make the most of my gift without taking advantage of his condition, Cynar shifted against my legs. I looked down. He was blinking up, not at me, but at the struts and beams that held the platform in place. "You've done well, Mèco," he said. Unexpectedly for one so languid, he leaped to his feet using my shoulders for leverage, nearly toppling me, and spread his legs wide. He reached up with his arms into the canopy and set about rocking and stomping as if he were trying—and failing, I observed smugly—to dislodge my construction.

"It's not going anywhere, kibi," I laughed and reached out my hand, encouraging him back to sit beside me—even in the oppressive heat of the summer evening my body missed Cynar's unique heat.

In truth, though a touch more settled, the feral puppy Cynar had been when he earned his nickname was changed very little. I liked to think I had domesticated him a little—Tywyll said I had a way with domesticating the things he and Lys brought to Ikhaya, like the avala whom none but I could shear, and the kitoki that flocked around me morning and evening for the feed I set aside for them. So it was with my wild kibi, I liked to think. Perhaps he was less likely to show his teeth first thing, and more likely to listen. I credited my stories. When we ran through our one book, *True Tales of the Novigi*, for the third time, Tywyll had forbidden another iteration of the "kirottu lies" within and insisted on original stories. So, I told stories of the building of Ikhaya, then dredged up others I remembered from my antique books and silex readers and vis-streams from the dome. As if my stories were an anchor, I felt confident Cynar was less likely to hare off, certainly not to leave me altogether. I finally felt my offer of a more ... involved love would encourage him to stay, rather than scare him away. Surely he wouldn't reject me?

I wagged my fingers again and he finally swung down and sat heavily. "Oof," I huffed, delighting in his rough affection, but aware a line existed, as sure as the river made a line between green Ikhaya and the sere landscape on the other side of the river. Like the river, I feared the line between Cynar and me would cut deeper the longer it existed.

I resumed my grooming of his hair, allowing my fingers to make tender little forays across his forehead and around his ears, all the while thinking about the implications of what I wanted. I wanted his body and his love; that much was easy.



Did I want to tame him, as Tywyll teased? I recalled the Novigi story of the boy who had fallen in love with a hawk. When Hawk had inadvertently injured Boy, Boy had disappeared rather than subject his lover to the remorse he would surely feel, thus ending their relationship, if not their love. Would Cynar hurt me with his love? Would I hurt him? I doubted it, feeling hope and a curious lightness swell my chest. But if our love damaged us, who would be Hawk and who Boy? Fear deflated me for a moment—being happy is more dangerous than being lonely, I reflected.

"Kibi," I began. "Cynar. I have something for you."

"It's not midsummer night yet, not time for gifts, but you could do more of that grooming," he said, and tipped his head back into my lap. My hands reached automatically to obey. Cynar blinked up with a grind of his head into the muscle of my thigh, eliciting a wince and a laugh from me. His voice, however, was cautious. "I have nothing for you."

My heart squeezed at the betrayed note in his voice, even as the words 'you have everything for me,' pushed up my throat. "Not a gift like that," I assured him. "Think of this platform as your midsummer gift." I tried to look into his river-bottom eyes. His pale lashes cast shadows much darker than themselves onto his sharp cheekbones.

"Won't you look at me, kibi?"

There must have been something portentous in my voice, for his reply was, "I fear what I will see." He turned his face into the bend of my lap, his nose pressing low on my belly. "I fear what you will say. Can't you give me your gift without a lecture?"

Words were not easy for my kibi, for all his skill with language—there was nary a traveler upon the river he couldn't find a way to communicate with. He shook his head free of my fingers and sat up, relenting at my hurt look to rest his head on my collarbone, digging in as was his wont, making me wince and thrill, like always.

"Please, kibi, my gift is ... all of me. Take my gift. Let me give it to you." I pleaded.

"If you must, Mèco." He turned his head so his breath rolled over my throat, hotter than the summer air around us, and heavier. "But I say this is a gift you have already given, and I have already received."

I leaned down and pressed my lips to his cheek, beside his ear, the only place on him I could reach without manhandling him into a more accessible position. "All I want is to love you. To consummate as muliañ. That's the gift I wish you to take. I am a poor gift, I know, but please, Cynar, please let me love you."

With relief, I noted he wasn't pulling away, and if I let my senses run ever so slightly amok, perhaps he shifted closer by minute fractions with each of my cautious, fearful kisses. Kisses and many other touches were common for us, but we both knew this was a further step. Declaring for each other as we had brought assumptions of affection and care, but we both knew what we were about that evening was something yet further, deeper, more ... permanent. As tangible and solid as Ikhaya all around us.

Soon, Tywyll would return, and though his bond with Lys made a unit with permeable edges, it was complete unto

itself. I wanted to define our edges—Cynar's and mine—before the midsummer nagir, when, with Lys' presence or without it, Tywyll would need us both as he entered his most vulnerable time.

My intentions may all have been clear to me, but Cynar's next words slammed home his ambivalence. "I am no one's amichu, Mèco. I'm broken, remember?"

"You never were." I left unspoken whether I referred to 'amichu' or 'broken.' I had thought about how to soothe this deficiency he felt. I said, "And I am no Novigi. We could not have been born for each other. But I cannot imagine anyone more *my own* than you. I don't care how it goes, but please take my gift—and me with it." I feared taking him in the way we had watched Lys and Tywyll do numberless times. With my greater size, I wondered if he feared my member as I feared the damage I might do with it. But I was truthful when I said I didn't care how it happened. One of us, inside the other, by any means or configuration, would be my bliss. More, it would seal our bond. I wanted Cynar to give me the same gift I offered him. If I thought about it, it was wildly presumptuous. I didn't think about it.

Over three seasons, Lys and Tywyll's tutelary affection had given me a repertoire from rough, laddish drapings of limbs (Tywyll was wont to fling an arm or leg over the handiest part of his companion of the moment) to Lys' puppyish pounces and snuggles. These lessons, enthusiastically undertaken, had not prepared me for Cynar. He was ready enough, after the Salter attack, to share the turvy's big bed with Tywyll and me, and he was nearly as free—if not as exuberant—as Lys

and Tywyll about sucking or stroking his partner to completion. But when I reflected (and weeding beans or shearing avala exhaust the body but leave the mind untethered, so my reflections bordered on the obsessive) I realized that Cynar never initiated. When I watched his eyes as he spent, there was a distance there that I admit I found comfort in. Lys and Tywyll were so very present in their lovemaking, so demanding of equal presence in their partners, that one such as I, with no knowledge and less experience, couldn't help but feel inadequate sometimes.

My feelings of inadequacy with Cynar ran on a different track. I knew better what to do with my body by the time we began sharing a bed: how to place my limbs, how to press with my hands or suck with my mouth, when to roll and bend. What I found I didn't know—because it was never at issue with Lys and Tywyll—was how to entice a lover, how to speak so a spark ignited, what look to flash for the desired message. I found, in my workaday reflections, that the spark and the message were the same: love. I blushed to think it. I loved Lys and Tywyll, fiercely, but they were and ever would be a unit as permeable and uncatchable as a morning mist. For Cynar, I felt something solid and finite.

And now, here he was, drunk on some concoction of bramble berries, staring up from my lap with mirth and lust. He palmed my prick through my tattered pants and said, "Whatever you want, Mèco. But this gift is one I've had before."

I kissed him rather than pinch the smirk off his face. I should stop, I knew, in pressing to realize my plan for the

night. Offering love to a drunken man is much akin to offering water to a swimming one—there is no need, and the appearance of surfeit. He wouldn't understand. Not tonight. My intentions were stated, though my tipsy partner might need reminding in the morning, so for now, I would wait. That didn't mean I couldn't put my feelings into action in more familiar ways.

I tunneled my fingers through the hair I'd smoothed, and decided that I might put this love I felt into the same sharings to which we already were accustomed. I gathered him up by the shoulders, settling his bony little bottom in my lap, and kissed him.

"That's what I thought," he murmured, and I smelled the yeast and berries on his breath. "You're randy tonight."

"And you're high," I replied, through more little kisses. "I shouldn't take advantage of you."

"You'd better," he replied with a tweak of my nipple through my sweaty shirt. When I gasped, he did it harder. While I arched from that touch, he raised up enough to over balance us. Over we went, and the volo platform creaked when we landed, but it held. We spent a desperate few moments shedding our sweaty clothes, the summer breeze like another set of fingers on my bared skin.

"Mmm," Cynar's voice buzzed over my temple, echoing the insects' lazy burr, and ruffled the hair by my ear. I shivered. His responses always thrilled me.

I wrapped my arms around Cynar's narrow ribcage and squeezed gently, pressing our bodies together. *I love you, muliañ, best beloved, I love you, love you, love you.*

Could he hear me? The rhythm of my mental chant drove my hips as I raised them to meet Cynar's, and directed the pattern of my fingers up his spine, pulling his shirt with them. The Novigi don't sweat as other people do, and I had felt slimy and boorish the first time we came together in the warm weather. But I had learned such differences had their compensations.

"Slick, Mèco," Cynar mumbled against my neck. "Smell good." He drove his nose under my arm, forcing my hand away from his spine and above my head, and got on with a very thorough bathing of my armpit. I could smell myself, and tamped down my embarrassment. The skin there, untouched by the sun, was sensitive, and Cynar's tongue was strong and mobile. I was babbling before a minute had passed.

Telling myself I didn't do it for the control it would give me, but in deference to Cynar's intoxication, I rolled us, covering his smaller body. I felt big, and heavy, not oafish as I did sometimes, but powerful. Protective, too, tender, but powerful. I caged my prey with my arms, bracketed his legs with mine, pressed down with my chest against his and my hips at his thighs. He tried to spread his legs, but I held firm, staring down into his eyes, drilling love into him, smiling and leaning to kiss. I knew with any man but me, this position would be intolerable to Cynar.

I rocked my hips and whispered, "What shall I do with you," into his perfect little ear.

"Shall I tell you what to do?" he whispered back, arching his spine so I could feel the points of his hipbones and between them the softer, rolling press of his prick and balls.

I knew just what I wanted, then. If I couldn't have the consummation of love I had intended for tonight, if I couldn't have the interpenetration of our bodies, I could have something else.

Without releasing Cynar from the confines of my body, I encouraged him to turn with soft words and nips of my teeth. When his bare nape appeared under my lips, I bit there, harder than I had elsewhere. I set my teeth and held on, pulling back with teeth and hands so that he knelt under me, so that he had to take my weight, at least a little bit. I bent my knees to fit between his, and pushed out.

"Wider, wider," I murmured around the skin of his neck.

Wider he went, until I was sure I heard his sinews creak. Then I leaned back, keeping my hands on his hips to maintain that position.

I surveyed my prize, from the glistening oval where I had bitten his neck, down the deep, bowed spine. I smoothed my hands over misleadingly delicate ribs. I dug in a bit under them, tickling, smiling when he writhed and gasped out a chuckle. He didn't shift position, though. He was waiting to see what I'd do.

I lay kisses along his back as I reached around. His prick was hard, and his small, perfect balls nudged my wrist. There is nothing so arousing as the sweet dangle of excited male parts from this angle. I could feel his belly expand and contract with his breaths, hitching when I let my free hand glide up to tug at his nipples. He wasn't, of course, at my mercy, but something about the smaller body under mine and the knowledge that his pleasure was in my hands, thrilled me.

I moved one hand down to support my weight and, cradling his cock and balls in the basket of my hand, moved lower.

I put a matching bite mark high on his ass, at the place where my tongue felt the modest swell from back to buttock. The eye couldn't see it, but as soon as I tasted the change in landscape, I bit it.

"Ah! Mèco!" He shouted and slid forward onto his elbows, which movement thrust his hips high. The sight of his buttocks parting right under my face first dried my mouth (so animal it seemed) and then promptly brought a flood to my mouth. I knew just what to do with it.

I leaned forward and set my thumbs alongside each other against that tender crack. This was something I had watched Lys and Tywyll do, so the idea was not so foreign; it never would have occurred to my stunted sexual imagination on its own.

My tongue followed my thumbs along the soft, hot skin, angling inward and down until I licked over and around Cynar's asshole.

I groaned at the taste I found. How could something so base seem, in this moment and with the buzz of cicadas and the harsh sougning of Cynar's breath for music, so very sublime?

"Mèco!" Cynar moved his hips in tiny jerking movements, evidently reluctant to suffocate me in my strangely vulnerable, powerful position. Other than my name, he spoke no words, but I knew what he wanted, and I knew I wanted to give it to him.



Withdrawing my thumbs, letting Cynar's damp cheeks rest against my cheeks, I supported my weight on one hand and slid the other back under his body. As I licked, I found I could use my hand to nudge his balls backward to meet my chin. Pressing gently upward, I used Cynar's balls to rub that spot which Lys and Tywyll had taught us responds like a switch from the inside or the out.

Oh, how he wailed. If only I had a third hand, to see to his prick, or a fourth, to torment his nipples. I missed Tywyll in that moment.

Cynar couldn't come off his elbows lest he fall flat and lose my attentions to his bottom, so his prick would just have to wait.

Something about sensing his growing need, causing it, and not satisfying it, satisfied *me* perversely. Rushes of heat and ice bathed my groin, but my prick was as neglected as Cynar's. That symmetry also pleased me.

I licked, probed, and rubbed until I thought my jaw might unhinge, and pulled back with considerable regret.

The moment I did, Cynar moved with such speed his turning hip knocked me in the jaw.

"Impatient kibi," I chided as I crawled up his supine body.

"Your fault, Mèco. All yours," he shot back, lifting his head for a kiss I imagined must, to him, taste ripely novel.

Putting our pricks together forced Cynar's lips away from mine, but the kiss of those organs was the more urgent.

We weren't slick, except with sweat, and the friction was rough.

"Rub harder," Cynar demanded.

I smiled, probably rather wildly. The abundant hair surrounding my cock was a source of fascination; even Tywyll had been known to spend surprising lengths of time combing through it with his fingers (or toes). For my part, I barely felt the downy hairs that graced Cynar's crotch.

We ground together, with him stretching and me bowing to see each other's eyes in the advancing twilight.

"Oh, oh, Cynar. Kibi. It's coming," I gasped.

"You are."

I bit my lip. "I am. You, too. Come. Please come with me." It seemed important.

"Now?"

"Now!" Little idiot, to negotiate at such a moment. How I loved him!

His legs went around my waist, gripping hard, his heels pressing sharply into my buttocks. He threw back his head and screamed.

I was more restrained, if only because most of my breath was gone. Our seed was warmer than the muggy air for a few minutes, an obvious and specific heat.

Then it cooled to match the temperature of our overheated skin. I rolled my hips, enjoying the feeling of slickness. *Together*, I thought, and I couldn't have said whether I rejoiced we had come together, or that we were stuck together.

"Move, you great lout," Cynar grunted, shoving me to one side and promptly putting the lie to his grumpy tone by wriggling up to kiss me. It was a sloppy kiss, more mutual panting than kissing, but it was wonderful. Perfect. I gazed up

at the purple sky through the canopy of he'eva boughs, and began counting stars as they winked on in the falling dark.

Cynar's eyes were closed, though his lips still kissed at mine weakly.

I pulled him closer.

I don't know how long we slept on the scratchy rug of the tree platform. I only know that it was full dark when a cold, hard hand wrapped itself around my ankle and tugged me awake.

"Wha..." I yelled. I might have yelped. Cynar rolled off me and into a defensive crouch so quickly he might have been awake already.

"Kusheri!" He barked when he saw who had joined us. "Why the kirottu surprise? Should have pulled the ladder up behind me."

Tywyll's eyes, black in the darkness, but flashing, narrowed. His teeth showed in the fragments of moonlight that shone through the leaves of our retreat.

Gently, I pulled my foot away from Tywyll's clawed grip. "Just join us, eh, no need to wake us, eh, lomi?"

Tywyll let out a growl that confirmed my nickname for him: small, fierce, and very angry-sounding. "It will be light soon. We have to be ready," he said. Tywyll was given to non-sequiturs at the best of times, and that growl told me this was decidedly not the best of times.

"Why, lomi?"

"Something's happened," Cynar surmised.

"Yes, something's happened." Tywyll hauled himself over the edge of the platform and sat in a tight little knot of knees

and elbows and hunched shoulders. Though the night was only a little bit cool, I saw he shivered.

"Lomi, tell me." I scooted over on my bare bottom, aware of the spunky smell of myself as I shifted my limbs.

Tywyll lifted his moon-silvered head, and the shine in his eyes wavered and spilled.

"Tears, lomi? Oh, why?" I opened my arms to enwrap him. Quicker than a sneeze, he launched himself at me, toppling me so that Cynar was forced to catch me. I stayed in that awkward position, sensing from the hot feeling in my belly that I would very shortly want both of them as close as possible.

I was right.

Tywyll's next words were, "I'm just back from the navdi. Lys was not among them."

"Maybe Lys is on his way back to us by a different route than you took," Cynar said reasonably, but his hands tightened on my shoulders and his chest rose and fell shallowly. He was as alarmed as I.

"I would know," Tywyll said while I stroked his back. "I would know, wouldn't I, khari?"

I didn't have an answer for him. I had long assumed Lys and Tywyll's amichu connection extended beyond the work they did, so attuned were they to each other's moods and needs. But I supposed, too, that such a connection might be born of long association, and therefore foreign to me.

When I didn't reply, Tywyll pulled back from me, not quite out of my arms, and looked from me to Cynar.

"Kusheri, if Lys were on his way here, he'd be here by now. Something's happened."

I felt Cynar nod against my shoulder.

"The midsummer full moon is days away," Cynar said. "He promised he'd be back by then."

"Back to stay," I added, needing to. I missed my sweet madi.

"But the navdi," Tywyll said. "They were alone."

"Thriving?" Cynar asked.

Tywyll nodded. If nothing had befallen the small pack of predators, encumbered as they were by their young, then it was likelier nothing had befallen Lys.

"How do you want to proceed, lomi?" It had to be up to him. He was declining fast toward his midsummer nagir, and I knew he feared the sleep and vulnerability that would come, for all that the nagir of the dark amichu was supposed to be less deep, less absolute, than that of the bright amichu at midwinter.

"We'll wait for first light, and then go looking. If we don't find him..." Tywyll trailed off, and I knew he was certain we wouldn't. We sat together until the sun peeped over the horizon, and from our high perch, I savored the riot of color reflected in the slow-flowing river. I knew it might be our last peace for some time, if such stillness equaled peace. By the time the morning mist had burned away and the sun was bright enough to show me the colors of my amichus' eyes, we were away on our search.

\* \* \* \*

We didn't find Lys.

Instead, we had an argument about who should leave Ikhaya to search for him and who should stay behind in case he returned.

We had started at the he'eva grove, and followed navdi trails until we found the pack itself. The adults came loping over to Tywyll, sniffed Cynar and me a little more warily, and commenced to mill about expectantly, circling closer and closer around their tumbling young as minutes passed.

"They're looking for Lys, too," Tywyll said. "If they knew he was safe, they would act safe themselves."

That made more sense than Tywyll usually did on a first pass, so we moved on. We searched as far as we could go, reaching two borders of Ikhaya by our most common paths. Lys might have taken others, but there was no reason to think so. That left the far border, on the other side of the turvy and fields, which we reasoned Lys couldn't have reached without passing us, and it left the river.

"What if he decided to leave us?"

A month ago, I'd have accused Cynar of baiting us with that comment, and Tywyll would have challenged him. Now, we just rolled our eyes and shoved him back and forth between us for a spell, just to hear him growl.

"How are we going to find him, then?" Cynar asked after he'd shaken us off.

And that's what started the argument.

As far as I was concerned, the choice was obvious. Tywyll couldn't go, as he was on the verge of his nagir. And Cynar, though he was at the height of his bright-amichu energies,

was still small, young, and Novigi. I was none of those things, and therefore the one likeliest to have success on the road. I steered my argument to more winnable tacks.

We were on the move, heading back to the turvy by the most roundabout way we could in hopes of spotting some sign of Lys. Having packed nothing for our search, we stopped briefly to pick berries from the bramble bushes that had given Cynar the ingredients for his sour wine, and the look of purple berry juice vivid on his and Tywyll's lips threatened to distract me. "The moment taon folk or worse, Salters, see you two, they'll know what you are."

"No one knows what we are," Tywyll grumbled. *Not even you*, I imagined him finishing in his head.

"They don't have to know *precisely* what you are. They'll know you're different, therefore suspect, therefore of interest to Salters. I can blend in, look like a taon dweller if I need to."

Cynar snorted at that. "You blend in better with the kitoki. All you have to do is open your mouth and anyone will know you're a kirottu domer."

"I ain't no pikin' domer, you whore's spoor," I countered, imitating Varas' nasal drawl. Even Tywyll chuckled a little at my attempt.

I pressed my advantage. "Tywyll, you will sleep very soon. We don't want to consider it, but what if Lys isn't found before you do? You can't find him if you're not even awake." I didn't want to dwell for the merest second on the image of Cynar, in a taon or a Salter camp, alone and vulnerable like he had been when he had his first nagir at midwinter. I didn't

remind either of them of what happened to his friend Cyso when their neighbors had misunderstood what was "wrong" with Cynar and driven the young Novigi out, indirectly killing him. That could so easily happen again.

"If the trail is a long one, I will sleep," Tywyll conceded.

Cynar leaned forward. "I am not so ... complete an amichu as you, kusheri, but I am at my peak now. I will follow whatever trail there is. You stay, rest, and Mèco and I will go."

A bolt of panic slammed me. "No, kibi. Tywyll can't be alone." His first nagir had occurred in a brothel and had been fraught with fear and abuse by his masters. I didn't presume Cynar knew of this, but I knew Tywyll couldn't be left alone.

"You think I'll be a liability?"

I almost laughed, he looked so affronted. "No, kibi, I think you'll be safer here. I think Tywyll—and Ikhaya—need you." I refrained from mentioning it and so did Tywyll and Cynar, but we all were aware I was the most expendable of the three of us.

"Even weak, and with the exception of the longest day, I can work," Tywyll put in. Indeed, his decline was much less sharp than Lys' had been. He could work, and would, I knew.

I agreed, turning my head so no one saw my apprehension. "The beans will need harvesting within a quarter moon." The timing was horrible, unavoidable. I was the one who could wield our most efficient metal tools at harvest.

"You're worried about our defense," Tywyll reminded me. I was also the one who would wield knives and metal-tipped



ulu bolts, though my amichus had had some success hunting with stone-tipped and fire-tempered volo bolts.

I fixed Tywyll with what I thought of as our 'man to man' look. "Can you summon the navdi? Will they protect you?"

He nodded. The navdi had accompanied us on parts of our search for Lys, and we'd been able to observe them at play with their fast-growing cubs. They were able to leave them for short periods now, to hunt or patrol.

Cynar spoke up. "If we let Mèco go, who will protect *him*? The navdi pack won't separate, will they?"

I tried and failed to imagine myself arriving in a taon trailing part of a navdi pack. "Not after the Salter killed one of their own," Tywyll confirmed. "Even before their loss, they wouldn't have been inclined to separate."

"You forget, kibi, I have weapons." All the most effective ones might as well accompany me; Tywyll and Cynar couldn't even touch them.

"Pah," I felt his explosive breath on the side of my neck. We lingered in the kitchen, loath to clear up from our evening meal while the argument stood unresolved. "Knives and an ulu against their guns." He shook his head.

*And whatever else they have*, I thought to myself.

"Mèco fights well, kusheri," Tywyll assured Cynar, though Cynar knew my skills as well as I knew his; any training we had done, had been together.

Cynar stayed silent. I felt the bands of his arms hard about my ribs.

Tywyll spoke again, and I knew I had won the argument. "And he's smart, is our khari. If any can avoid trouble, it is he."

Cynar nodded and I felt his arms relax fractionally.

"Help me pack, kibi, and then you and lomi can give me a proper farewell."

"Best ready the boat before dark," Tywyll put in. Cynar nodded, but refused to meet my eyes.

We accomplished the necessary tasks, discussed strategies for them and for me. I packed food, hoping it would be enough, along with weapons and Lys' own medical concoctions, hoping neither would be needed. When we finally admitted all was in readiness for my dawn departure, I found I was strangely reluctant to enter the turvy. I knew we would love each other. I didn't think I could bear it, knowing it might well be the final time.

At last, Tywyll towed me through the door. "He's frantic, you know," he whispered as I passed him to duck through the door flap.

"And you're not?" I tried to inflect my words with teasing. I failed.

Cynar sat, cross-legged and nude, on the wide bed. A peat fire glowed in the central hearth. The smoke and musk smell of *home* prickled my nose and stung my eyes with tears.

"He is beautiful, no?" Tywyll prompted while he shed his clothes.

"You sound like a whoremonger," Cynar complained, shifting his position to hide his prick.

"Don't hide, kibi," I said, approaching him. "You are very beautiful, and no whore."

Strong fingers found the tender underside of my rump and pinched.

"Ay!" I yelped. "Lomi!"

Tywyll grinned, unrepentant. "I am beautiful too, yes?"

I made a great show of surveying his lean face and body, walking a circle around him, lifting the variegated, knotted locks of his hair. It reached to the curve of his ass now, and bore three distinct horizontal stripes, gold from the last two summers framing the pure white of the intervening winter.

"Never cut your hair, lomi," I murmured, draping it over my face as I nuzzled his neck.

"No," drawled Cynar, "it's much too useful as a leash the way it is."

"Get him," Tywyll hissed in my ear as he sprang away from me and onto the bed.

"You give me ideas, kibi," I warned.

"It's about time you had one we might all get behind," he shot back, fending off Tywyll.

"Oh, yes, khari," Tywyll cried with exaggerated lust. "Get behind us. Behind our behinds!"

The two of them dissolved into laughter. I thought it sounded tinged with hysteria, but who was I to say?

"I have a better idea," I promised. "Let me try something new. Kneel up."

I positioned them facing each other, belly to belly and cock to cock. Stroking them all the while, I wound several rough

cords of Tywyll's hair around Cynar's neck, tying them loosely together.

"Mèco, you're..." I wasn't sure who rasped that out, as I was binding their wrists gently beside their hips. The hair wasn't long enough to do more. *Maybe next summer*, I thought, and grimaced at my own hopefulness.

"You're mine now, and can't escape," I realized the irony the moment I spoke. Lys had gone from us, and my playful words brought his absence between us as if he, too, were bound there.

"What will you do with us now?" Cynar asked, and the unwonted gentleness in his voice told me he had understood my unintended meaning.

In truth, I wasn't sure what to do with them. I caressed their shoulders and turned their faces to kiss me, both because I wanted kisses and to buy myself time. After all, I was only a little more accustomed to taking the initiative in this bed than Cynar.

Tywyll rocked his hips against Cynar's carefully so as not to pull his hair. The sight of him bound, forced to act with restraint, inflamed me.

"Spread your legs, both of you," I whispered, and was immediately obeyed.

On my back, I wormed beneath the warm bridge their legs made, my shoulders pushing their legs wider yet. "Oh, my," I murmured. Looking up, their balls hung full above my face, ripe as the berries we'd eaten that afternoon. Their two cocks were obscured, but enough light found its way between them that I could see their chests gleaming, their pointed nipples.

Like an avala kid, I bent my neck and suckled at the offered fruits.

I heard Cynar and Tywyll kissing. It sounded very wet, and drove me to new feats of imagination. Reaching, insinuating my hand upward between their bodies, I found first one, then the other hard prick and angled them downward.

"Mnnh, Mèco," somebody's voice reached me, sounding very close to coming. Could I get both cock heads in my mouth? I tried, failed with an embarrassing sucking *pop*, and tried again. By inching my mouth up like Lys shinnying up a tree, I finally succeeded. I couldn't suck with my mouth so distended, nor move much. Fortunately, neither was necessary. Before I was ready, the tightly squeezed crowns in my mouth delivered more seed than I could swallow, and for longer than I was used to.

Spluttering, wiping seed and spit from my mouth and nose (and chin and eyes), I dropped my head back to the bed and complained, "You greedy things couldn't take turns?"

"You didn't," Cynar said. With a couple of flicks that demonstrated the ineffectuality of my binding, Tywyll and Cynar were free.

"You take top," Tywyll muttered as he sat on my ankles. Cynar sat on my chest, facing away, pinning my arms with his shins much more effectively than I had bound him.

"You've got me," I panted, feeling silly speaking to Cynar's smooth ass. "Now will you have mercy?"

"Never!" They cried together and set to like scavengers on a battlefield. Fingers and tongues and teeth flew from belly to hip to groin, alighting and gobbling and confusing my senses

until I keened like a mourner. My balls emptied so fast there was pain, and I welcomed it.

If I thought my spending would free me from my wicked captivity, I was wrong. The moment my prick stopped its spasms, Cynar and Tywyll straightened themselves out and spread over me like a blanket, their full weight on me and as welcome as the pain had been with my pleasure.

My mind made a feeble attempt to inventory my supplies and plans for the coming day, but my body's need for sleep must have been stronger, for I woke to gray light filtering through the chimney, my lovers' heads still pinning my shoulders.

Only the pang of missing Lys' feathery head among them could have spurred me to leave that blessed confinement.

\* \* \* \*

It took no effort to notice where Ikhaya's border lay. The green I had become used to, summer's promise of rich fecundity, dimmed somehow as I drifted beyond the majava's jumbled lodge, not even pausing to watch the tumblings of the flat-tailed kits as they learned the art of lodge-building. Beyond the river bend, the land became duller, quieter. I shuddered despite the heat.

Our side of the river had no settlements upriver or down, as far as we knew, at least none within several days' walk. What I thought of as Varas' side of the river had taons that I knew of (like the one that had coughed up Lys and Tywyll), and now more slapdash settlements closer by, that sprang up

over the past year or so, peopled by refugees, as Salters overtook taons and Domes ejected undesirables.

According to our plan, instead of afoot, I left by boat. The nondescript old launch was the only artifact of our springtime fight with the Salters that inspired gratitude. Through the morning I drifted slowly with the current, looking for evidence of landfall on either side, stopping often to investigate, but finding nothing. On my head was a ridiculous sunshade woven by Cynar of flat river reeds. It had been given to me with such solemn gravity I smiled even now to think of it. I'd wrapped the boat's pole in rags to give my sweaty hands purchase, and wished for the hundredth time since pushing off that the Salters had left more fuel.

I poled along, keeping to the deep middle channel, and lunched as I went. I spared a moment's longing, working through the heat of the day, for the breathless post-prandial snogging we'd instituted as the summer got high. But, I reminded myself as I glared wryly at my hopeful, hopeless prick rising in my loose trousers, those snogs had been incomplete without Lys. The thought of being permanently without him spurred me.

These were my thoughts as I peered onto the river banks on either side of me; not seeing anything of interest might have made me lax in my attention. A loud braying snapped me back to the task at hand.

An avala's narrow head protruded above the rubbly bank on the opposite side of the river to Ikhaya. I dug my pole in hard to slow the craft, steering as best I could with one foot

on the rudder. The avala didn't run at my approach. *Injured ... or tame?* I wondered to myself as I made landfall.

Tame, as it happened. And known to me.

"Ruki!" I exclaimed, astonished.

Varas' old avala tilted his head to regard me with one large eye, swiveling his ears in what I knew from our own herd was a sign of distress.

I tied up the boat to a scrubby clump of bushes that leaned so far over the eroded river bank I was sure the pull of the current on the boat would detach the weak roots and strand me. I decided finding Varas' old pack animal so far from home was compelling enough a reason to risk the stop.

As I climbed the river bank, the smell of blood and shit assaulted me.

"Ruki, boy, are you hurt after all?" I asked as if he could answer me.

"Gut shot, lad, and a goner," came the reply.

"Varas!" I scrambled the rest of the way up the bank, and over into a small, sandy hollow. Ruki tried to dance away from my frantic approach, but was tethered.

I stroked his dusty, matted wool, absently comparing it to the healthier spring of Ikhaya's avala herd, and looked down.

Varas' skinny body sprawled haphazardly in the hollow, as if sitting up or lying down were an impossible effort, and the man lay where he'd been thrown.

I crouched down, holding my breath against the dead stink of him, and brought my face where he could see it.

"What happened, Varas?" I didn't ask who'd shot him. It could only be Salters. Who else had guns?



"Water," he croaked.

I gave him some from my clay bottle. The lip came away slick with his blood. I tipped some into my palm to offer Ruki, and set about freeing the beast from the tether; I judged he wouldn't go far.

I helped Varas sit up, my habitual revulsion in his presence warring with horror over his condition.

"Who did this?" I asked.

Varas gestured weakly at his chest, and that's when I saw the insignia there.

"You're wearing a Salter uniform," I said, unnecessarily.

"They ... hired me ... when they learned..." His breathing was shallow, and his breath rattled with blood and mucus.

"What did they learn?" I prompted. I had a feeling I could guess, but some cruel part of me wanted to hear it from Varas' bloody lips.

He gave me a wry smile. "I'm an expert on the magic boys."

"The...?" I removed my hat and unwrapped the cloth from my head so I could press it against the more obvious of his wounds. It wouldn't help, I feared. There was little blood still seeping, but not from incipient healing. Varas was nearly bled out.

"Them whores of yours. The ones what ain't whores. They're magic."

"That's insane!" My amichus were incredible, with their special ties to each other and the land they had claimed. But magic? Surely not.

"Salters ... came to me, offered..." Varas waved his hand as if to say 'offered me everything.' He went on. "I knew your little green-haired whore was downriver."

"You led them to Lys?" I shouted. Ruki startled and shuffled a few steps away, grunting.

"I should kill you!"

"Too late," Varas gasped. "Salters beat you to it."

"So where did they take him?" It was all I could do not to shake the man until his teeth fell out.

"Dunno. Some taon. Dall, maybe?"

I wouldn't ask what their purpose was. And I wouldn't dwell on the inescapable fact that one half of a pair of amichus would be useless to them. Useless as Varas evidently had become. Oh, Lys!

My heart sped in my chest and the sweat on my back froze. "You've killed him, Varas." I scarcely recognized my own voice.

"You could ... kill me," Varas said.

Mind racing from Lys in captivity to Tywyll and Cynar, vulnerable and alone, I almost missed Varas' words.

I stared at him. "That would be a favor, I think."

"Don't you owe me one?"

I stood and, under the pretence of checking on Ruki, walked to the river. I crouched and let the current wash Varas' blood and spittle from my hands. Varas had been nothing but trouble since we met two summers past. He'd cheated me, used me for my labor and expertise, tried to rape Cynar. At this last, an unbidden smile tugged my mouth out of its scowl as I remembered the outcome of that

particular attempt. Sobering quickly, I had to admit that without Varas, I'd have no Lys or Tywyll and ultimately, no Cynar. Yes, I owed him. But death?

I turned back to find Varas seizing. His back was bowed and his dry tongue protruded from his cracked lips in a grimace I knew I'd long remember.

I rushed to his side and raised him up, hoping to clear his breathing.

"Quick," he croaked. His eyes were desperate, wheeling in their sockets.

Still, I hesitated. I had been more than ready to kill Salters to protect Ikhaya. But to kill a man I despised for nothing but his own ease? With that thought, I decided, and drew my bone-hafted tumi from my belt.

"Please," he rasped, his eyes shuttering. It was enough; my hand moved.

I will never know whether Varas' final seizure killed him, or my blade in his neck. I will always wonder.

\* \* \* \*

The walk to Dall taon took two days.

As I watched my supply of bean cakes and dried berries disappear in alarming volume down Ruki's long, fuzzy neck I ruminated on the irony of having a beast of burden from the very man who, nearly a year earlier, had cheated me out of my meager first harvest and saddled me with two slaves I hadn't the faintest idea what to do with. Good thing they knew what to do with me.

I would have to stop and barter for food along with the information I sought. I scratched between Ruki's tattered ears and led him on.

In Dall, a taon I had heard about from Varas but never visited, I chose the less ramshackle of two taverns and reluctantly traded an afternoon's labor for our suppers and a bed for me. I'd be no good to Lys starved and exhausted, I reminded myself.

Once I'd completed the repairs the dour tavern keeper had detailed, I ventured into the common rooms, hunching over my stale ale and indifferent stew, watching taon folk come and go. Few lingered or socialized, and none said anything of use. I began to despair that Lys and the Salters had come through at all, when I heard a pair of grim and dusty men mention a name I knew.

"Oh, yeah," the one said. "That Varas is a fast talker. Had them Salters going for sure."

"Wish I'd thought of it," the other replied. "They gave him an advance on the bounty and everything."

"He told me there were more than one of them magic men."

"Bet he wouldn't tell you where to get one of your own." The men laughed harshly together, scoffing at their own sorry state, it seemed to me.

The laughter trailed off. "Bah. Even if I had me one'a them magic fellas, I couldn't have struck the bargain ol' Varas did."

I thought of Varas with a Salter bullet in his belly and my knife in his throat, and figured no matter how miserable these men were, Varas' bargain was not in the least enviable.

"He's a wily one," his friend agreed, and the two settled in for several companionable, silent minutes with their mugs.

For my part, I was rooted to my seat, even after the fat on my stew went white and I'd swallowed the last of my ale. They might speak again, and I'd piss myself rather than miss it.

I finally admitted defeat when the door opened again. "Varas!" called a voice. I was starting to think the reason Varas' farm was so poor compared to ours wasn't that he lacked Novigi talent (or even magic), but that he spent so little time there. He must have been away more than home, to be so well known in this relatively distant place.

"Ain't seen him," one of the original pair said.

The new man shook his head, "But that mangy beast o' his, that Ruki, he's out in the stable."

"No kiddin'?"

"I'd know that critter anywhere."

"So Varas ain't here?"

"Nah, he's off gathering glory with the Salters, acquiring them one'a them magic whores."

"What 'ya mean, 'off'? They got one, didn't ya hear?" From the tail of my eye, the new arrival looked fit to burst with importance at the information he had to offer. The other two leaned forward on their benches, and one poured him a cannikin of ale. "Salters came through before dawn, wouldn't let anyone near their truck, seemed bent on reaching Haetta by sunset."

"That far?" said the first man, with an incredulous tone.

"Maybe ol' Varas went with 'em, boarded Ruki here," said the second. "Wonder why the hurry?"

I fought every instinct to lean forward, to hear perfectly. A great rush might signal nothing more than military efficiency, I reasoned, but what if it meant Lys were injured? The third man's next words made me bite my lips, hard, to keep from crying out.

"There's some fancy domer scientist in Haetta, seconded to the Salters or the Hierarchs or something. They want him to have a look at this magic fella, maybe get his secrets without messing him up too much."

I dug my fingers into the muscle of my thigh, hard enough to bruise, so strong was the urge to leap up and run out of that place and toward Haetta, wherever that was.

The three men were nodding sagely, as if they knew all about torturing a captive. "Them Salters'll get you to sell yer grandmother's teeth. I wonder what one'a them domer bosses could do?"

"Get you to sell your whole grandmother, I reckon." I spoke without consciously deciding to do so, and without moving, even to look at the three men.

In rapid succession that would have been comical if not for the cold stone of fear for Lys cramping my middle, the three men looked at me.

"Like you know," one said. His companions sneered.

I turned in my chair the better to face them, making sure the scar on my hand was well hidden.

"I pity the man who knows what I do about the Hierarchs," I tried to put a steely, forbidding tone in my voice. I glared at them from under my brows and waited.

Before too long, their gossip's desire for information overrode their bully's need to intimidate, and the newest arrival said, "You seem to have a heck of an interest in them magic folk, eh?"

I hadn't said a thing about the Novigi, so I knew this fellow had betrayed his own interest. "Nah," I said as if magic people were of less than no interest to me. "I'm interested in the Hierarchs, and their trained Salter dogs."

The third man seemed to have become the spokesperson of the bunch, threw triumphant looks to his friends. He thought he'd winkled out my secret. I suppressed a smirk of my own.

"Well, friend, if you want to avoid the Hierarchs, you'll be wanting to move opposite to Haetta, then. Expecting trouble?"

"Always, friend," I said, and stood to leave the common room. Now that I had a destination, I could afford a little magnanimity. I sought out the tavern keeper, and exchanged the bed I wouldn't be using as the price of a long night of drinking for my new friends.

I would have liked to ask the trio for more information, but I knew, even after a year outside the dome, that to engage with them further meant risking revealing myself as not one of them, and risking detection had just had its price raised.

I collected Ruki, who grumbled a bit at being wakened in the dark, and set out based on barely coherent directions

from the hostler before leaving him to slip back into whatever drunken dreams I'd interrupted.

If there'd been more than one road between Dall and Haetta, it would have been rank foolishness to attempt the trip at night. But, since there was only the one, I relaxed the merest fraction and simply made sure Ruki kept to the road, which was easy enough to see even by muddy moonlight.

Tired as I was from my trek so far, and rattled as I was from witnessing (or causing, to be fair) Varas' death, I was a little surprised to find my feet so light. My feet were sped along by great joy—Lys was found!—and fear: Lys, gaoled or worse, tortured, was a notion nearly beyond bearing. The thought that he might betray Ikhaya under duress was frightening, too. Many had seen our home from the riverbank, but none knew what it was, not really. I knew Lys would never recover if he were the inadvertent cause of our downfall, and I feared we'd never be able to reach home, reach Tywyll and Cynar, before the Salters and their machines. I chided myself for refusing to think about how to rescue Lys from his captors. Something would come to me—it had to.

"Come on, Ruki," I muttered, when the beast seemed in favor of slowing. "My sweet madi needs us sooner than later."

And so we tramped on through the darkness.

\* \* \* \*

The long night's walking insured I was at less than my best when Ruki and I arrived at Haetta taon. I had considered stopping for a brief rest—I've no doubt Ruki wouldn't have



objected—but now that I knew where Lys was, even one hour's delay was intolerable.

I had planned, during my dark walk, to proceed as I had done in Dall taon, to listen in taverns and ask questions if I found a more or less safe opening. But no taverns are open at dawn, and besides bakers, who I didn't expect would be much help to me, the only people about were in uniform. I decided to avoid them for as long as I could.

That plan proved impossible.

"Oy! You! With the stink-beast."

I turned to see two men in black approaching me.

"You insult my companion?" I countered. It was imprudent, I knew, but even Ruki must have some pride. He spat lazily in the dust of the street when I pulled on his makeshift halter to stop him.

Ignoring my attempt at humor, one of the men told me, "All visitors must register with the Alliance."

"The what?" I asked. I didn't even need to draw on my dumb-farmer repertoire. I had no idea what they meant.

One pointed toward the largest building in the haphazard collection of mud structures and temporary dwellings. From this distance it looked new, and permanent.

"What is that?" I asked, standing my ground.

"Alliance headquarters." *You moron*, the man's tone said. "Haetta is one of the model taons chosen to demonstrate the efficacy of the dome Hierarchs' alliance with the Salter army." He spoke as if reciting from a training module. "Now get over there."

He looked me up and down. "Or do you need an escort?" His sneering tone told me an escort was not meant to convey respect.

"Nossir," I said. "Come on, Ruki." I didn't bid them good day. There was no need, as they followed Ruki and me across the packed earth of the taon.

A hostler in uniform trotted up to relieve me of Ruki.

"Careful, he spits," I warned, then suppressed a grin as the man gave Ruki's lead as much play as he could and shuffled far to the side. *Good beast*, I thought.

I mounted the short flight of steps. The door was overhung with a black banner bearing a silver symbol I'd never seen before. It was in the style of a dome tattoo, so I found I could puzzle it out. There was the sigil of the dome Hierarchy, entwined with an image I knew I'd recognize anywhere: the fat 'S' of the Salter gangs. Brief flashes of our springtime fight with the Salter detachment, and of the same symbol covered in Varas' blood as he died, spun before my eyes as I pushed the door open.

A man sat at a desk immediately to the right of the door. "Business?" he barked. His breast pocket was decorated with the same symbol as the door; this must be the Alliance's mark.

This was no tavern lout, who might be expected to fall for my impersonation of a bumpkin. "Two uniformed gentlemen suggested I come here to register," I said, summoning the voice I had used for important presentations back in the dome.

The desk clerk appeared unimpressed. "Name?"

"I am Mèco, a traveler from south of here, on my way North for trade." Lys and Tywyll and Cynar were the only people who knew me by that name, so I felt safe enough giving it.

I waited while the man tapped some information into a touch-pad mounted on the desk. So the Hierarchs really were releasing dome technology to their chosen taons. Interesting. Scary, but interesting.

"Hm," the clerk grunted shortly. "Wait here. Guarnir!"

With a flick of his fingers he summoned one of the soldiers who had followed me in. 'Guarnir' wasn't the man's name, but another dome designation. How strange to hear such on the outside, and after so much time since my turfing.

The guard stepped uncomfortably close to stand between me and the door. The clerk scurried away.

"Wonder what little Byru saw in your record? Must be good to get him to leave his desk."

If memory served, soldiers, like tavern-squatters, were inveterate gossips, and this one seemed no exception. I stayed mum.

"Found something on you in the system, did he?"

*Mum, mum, mum*, I chanted in my head.

"Wonderful stuff, this domer tech."

Before the soldier got bored with his baiting game, the officious little bureaucrat was back.

"Rosh wants to see him," he told the soldier.

The soldier stood straighter. "Rosh, is it?" He looked me over again, and this time idle curiosity was overlaid with

something close to respect. "I'll take him back then, eh?" He towed me away before the clerk could reply.

"Right, then, here it is," the soldier said as he steered me through a doorway marked with the domer symbol for "Rosh," or commandant.

"Sir, this is the *visitor* Byru said you wanted to see." I didn't like the way he inflected 'visitor,' as if it were a designation that might change at the commandant's whim.

"Mèco, correct?" the commandant asked. He was a man in burly middle age. Looked harmless enough. I counseled myself not to get cocky. Somehow, he knew of me, even by this new name.

"Yessir," I said. That earned me a cuff on the back of the head from the soldier.

"You'll address the commandant as Rosh-pan, you!"

Ah, so taon honorifics were married to dome designations? *Curiouser and curiouser*, I thought to myself, remembering a strange book I'd read once. *And here's me, down the rabbit hole.*

"Dismissed, Guarnir," the commandant said. Then, as soon as the door closed behind my escort, he narrowed his eyes at me. He had the trick of seeming to look down upon me even while he was seated and I was standing. It was something my superior in the dome had been able to do. Must be part of the Hierarch training.

"We have a guest who's been asking for you."

*Lys!*

"Indeed, Rosh-pan?" I tried to affect affable puzzlement, but I fear my avid eyes gave me away.

"Funny fellow, seems to be able to talk to animals."

"Beg pardon, Rosh-pan, but that sounds improbable."

"Be that as it may, he's one of the New People."

"New people?" Feigning ignorance had served me well so far.

"They call themselves Novigi," he replied. "The Alliance has determined they may be of use, but they're hard to keep."

"Keep, Rosh-pan?" I flashed on an image of anyone trying to keep Lys like Varas had kept Ruki, then flashed on my earliest memory of Lys with a slaver's iron rings through his nipples.

"I doubt you're as thick as you make out," the man said shortly. He stood, reached out, and grasped my hand. The one with the scar. He held it up between us like it was a thing separate from my body.

"Who were you?"

I tried and failed to retract my hand. Stonewalling wasn't working anymore; maybe cooperation would. Now I knew Lys was in the building, I was more than anxious to get to him.

I answered simply. "I was Edor, Rosh-pan."

He let go my hand. "Which dome?"

I told him.

"Designation?"

"Prime," I said.

He pursed his thin lips at that. "Bit young, aren't you?"

"I was the most skilled," I said. There was no need for false modesty. He could check my credentials easily.

"When were you turfed?"

Answering that took some thought. Time before my amichus had been one long slog of fear and deprivation; time since had sped and brightened. I estimated. "Two years, Rosh-pan."

"Why were you turfed?"

I didn't mean to, but I looked at my boots when I answered. "Sedition."

"Fomenting rebellion?"

"No, Rosh-pan, sedition only." I hadn't thought of my actions as seditious when I undertook them, but standing up to the Hierarchs in favor of the pair bonding of two of my subordinates was seen as seeking to undermine the order of Productives and non-Productives in the dome. My young juniors had, despite their implants, fallen in love and wanted the libido-suppressant removed, as it would have been for the short period required for a procreation. My intervention in their case would merely have raised eyebrows had they not both been women. As it was, my action doomed more than my career: when they learned they'd be relocated to separate domes for 're-education,' my subordinates had acted on a suicide pact. There was talk, at the time, of charging me with their deaths as well, but the judge in my case had determined turfing was worse punishment than termination for one such as I. At the time, I had agreed with him. Reflecting on it now, I realized I was grateful to have been turned out of the dome, for all that my workers' deaths still wrung my heart.

Rosh made a note on his touch pad and sat once more. "Where did you fetch up?"

I saw his game. I would not give up Ikhaya. "Near Dall," I answered. It was the truth, in broad strokes.

"What is the Novigi to you?"

"My farmhand, Rosh-pan."

"You are so prosperous?" His skeptical look took in my sun-browned skin, callused hands, and rough clothing.

"He is my slave, if you must know," I answered, letting my voice drop a little. Slavery was not an element of dome life, so the Hierarchs insisted.

Rosh leaned back in his chair and laced his thick fingers over his big, hard belly. "Well, now, who'd have thought a turfed domer would take so easily to taon life?"

He was trying to draw me out. *Caution, caution*, I chanted to myself.

"He has no papers," the commandant said.

I shrugged and sighed audibly. "Who has papers these days?"

"He wears no rings."

*Damned right he doesn't.* "I removed them. They kept ... catching on things." I let myself smile ambiguously. "Living so far from *civilization*, I never imagined anyone would challenge my claim to him." I couldn't help the note of challenge that leaked out with my words.

"There, Edor, is where you make your mistake. Civilization is ... spreading, thanks to the Alliance."

*I seriously doubt that*, I thought sourly.

"It's good you've come," Rosh said, changing the direction of our interview. "You can help us convince the Novigi to work with us. They're rumored to be able to revive dead land, and

this is a skill that can serve the Alliance. He has a twin somewhere, according to our experts, but until this morning we thought 'Mèco' was its name. Now here *you* are."

*Kirottu Varas!* "I can assure you, Rosh-pan, I am no Novigi." I held up my scarred hand. "I am only a farmer, now, and need the labor of the fellow you're holding. You must have heard from your experts how difficult farming is."

When I didn't say anything else, Rosh's expression hardened again. "What else is he to you? Why does he call your name whenever we ask a question? Why does your name prevent him from cooperating?"

"I can't say, Rosh-pan." It was the truth; I couldn't guess why my name and not Tywyll's was the one Lys brought forth.

"He's your catamite, isn't he?"

I straightened. "And if he is?"

"If you're more than just his boss, you can influence him, convince him to work with us."

I reflected a moment. Rosh was the commandant of this station. Though it was a backwater, it was presented as a model of the new Alliance order. Rosh was an important man, and presumably a clever one. Why, then, was he so baldly currying my assistance? The answer seemed clear to me in an instant: he must be under pressure from someone cleverer still, and more important, to make the captive Novigi work for them.

"You can help us find his double."

"There is none such," I said, proud of the ring of conviction I achieved. Well, it was true, wasn't it, that there was no one



like Lys in all the world? I cast about for a way to dispel this fallacy, at least. Whatever happened to Lys and me, I could try to protect Ikhaya. "Your 'expert' was ... poorly informed."

"You won't help us?"

*Never.* "I regret, Rosh-pan, that I am unable."

The commandant's expression closed. He stood. "I will have to check your ... provenance," he said, his tone menacing. "Make sure you are who you say, and that your turfing charge was sedition only, and nothing more." His tone implied that any charge he pleased could be appended to my record with the merest stroke of his touch pad.

I felt a thrill of apprehension travel up and down my spine. Perhaps I had chosen the wrong approach with this man, but it seemed too late to change tack now.

I said nothing.

"Guarnir!" Rosh called. The door opened and my escort goon stuck his face in. "Take this man to the cells. I need to check his records further with the Hierarchy." Rosh looked away from me; there was no need to address me as a man anymore.

I quailed at the thought of imprisonment. Even the inquest into my juniors' deaths hadn't required my detention. And Rosh's dismissive treatment told me I'd be in a cell as long as he pleased and not a moment less. But if Lys was in the same cells...

The soldier grabbed my arm, more roughly than before, and pulled me through the door. As it closed, I heard Rosh barking orders into his comms unit.

I had wondered who might be pressuring Rosh.

In the event, I didn't have to wait long to find out, but sorely wished the wait had been longer.

\* \* \* \*

"Come on, then, you," my guard said, taking me by the shoulder, not restraining me in any way. Apparently, seditious though I was, I wasn't considered a threat to anyone in this bastion of new Alliance power.

He directed me down a short flight of steps, through a heavy, locked door, into the bright day that had developed like an ancient photograph while I had my interview with the commandant. We entered a courtyard of sorts. The packed earth rectangle was surrounded by wire mesh cages, much like I imagined kennels from the old days. There was even a faint animal smell there.

Only one pen, at the far corner from the entry door, appeared occupied.

"Lys!" I hollered and broke from my handler to charge across the courtyard, barely stopping when my body slammed into the tight links of the cell.

"Khari?" Lys looked up but didn't rise. In fact, he sat precisely in the middle of his cell, as far from all the surrounding metal wire as it was possible to be.

"Madi," I said, gently, fearfully, the burst of excitement at seeing him and the burst of fury at seeing him *like this* fading into a sick awareness that my guard surely wouldn't allow our reunion to continue once he reached me. "Have they hurt you?"

Lys shrugged as if to say simply being in this place hurt him, but shook his head slowly. I felt a modest surge of relief.

Through dry lips that cracked and showed blood when they moved, Lys spoke carefully. "We will go home now you've come?"

I hated that he made it a question. "I don't know, madi," I said. "I will be kept here while they check my history. After that..."

An indifferent blow to the back of my head told me my erstwhile captor had caught me up.

"You're over here," he said and pulled at my arm.

"Madi, look at me," I said as I was towed backward. "I'm here. You understand?" I wanted desperately to promise nothing bad would happen to him, that we would go home as soon as a minor bureaucratic misunderstanding was cleared up, but I wouldn't lie. For now, all I had to offer was my presence and my witness, so that is all I gave.

The gate to my cell clanged shut in front of my face. My goon had placed me as far from Lys as it was possible to be and still remain in the courtyard, and one cell off the corner, so I could only see my madi by cramming my body into the cell's corner, directly under the sun and with the wire of the mesh wall etching hatch marks into my flesh. From his position in the very center of his cell, I knew Lys couldn't see me at all.

"How is Tywyll?" Lys' voice reached me from across the gaol.

I wondered how much to say. It would give Lys comfort to hear about Tywyll and Cynar and the navdi. But what if the

guards were listening? I had not seen that this station had the means to listen as it was done in the domes, remotely. But they might be listening the old-fashioned way, too. It was a risk to speak, if the man in the tavern had it right and the Alliance of Salters and dome Hierarchs sought Novigi to aid in their plans to overtake and use the taons and force productivity from the ravaged country. I credited the story, given Rosh's avid interest in Lys and his "double."

If these men heard me and Lys talking about much of anything, and we stayed stuck in here for much longer, we'd have no way to warn Tywyll and Cynar. At the thought of his name, my heart twisted. Cynar! Best not to say anything to indicate who Tywyll was.

I regretted that my knowledge of Novigi extended no further than a few words—we could have spoken more freely if my grammar and vocabulary were better developed.

It tore me up to say, "Careful, *madi*, the walls have ears," but I knew, even here, Lys was stronger than most threats. And, I reminded myself, he was the bright *amichu* and thus at the peak of his powers at midsummer.

To my surprise, Lys laughed, if a bit ruefully. "Silly *Mèco*," he said, and I heard the affection in his voice across the baking courtyard. "Walls with ears. So silly."

I smiled grimly. They hadn't broken my *madi*. *Not yet*, hissed a niggling voice from some dark pit within me. *Not yet*.

"Speak of other things, then," Lys said. "Need your voice..."

So I spoke of my journey, of Varas' death, of the tavern in Dall, of Ruki. I spoke also about the plan our gaolers seemed

to have. Perhaps it was reckless to do so, but if I couldn't offer Lys the comfort of news of Tywyll and Ikhaya, then at least I would arm him with knowledge of why he was here, why he had been taken, and what might be demanded of him.

He understood. "Thank you, khari," he said. He lay down in the middle of his cell, carefully stretching out so no finger or toe accidentally brushed the treacherous metal wire. "I'd better rest and think before they come for me again."

"Before who comes?" I asked, alarmed.

But Lys didn't answer.

\* \* \* \*

"Right this way, sir." The door squealed open to admit Guarnir the guard and another man. No one had brought me or Lys anything to eat or drink in the several hours I'd been in my wire cage, but I didn't fool myself that that was about to change—Guarnir's voice was too obsequious to be addressing an orderly or kitchen boy.

The two men walked past my cell without stopping, crossing to Lys', but not before I got a glimpse of Guarnir's companion. He was uniformed in black, as Rosh and the guards were, but there was something different about this one. I tried to look at his face as he passed but it was blotted out by the sun behind him. What I did see was his hand. It was tattooed like all domers' hands were, but I couldn't read the entire symbol. The central piece, though, that I could read, and it made my blood freeze in the sweltering afternoon heat.

*Videc*. Scientist.

The bodies of the two men blocked my view of Lys, but couldn't stop his voice from reaching me.

"Kirottu diainav!" he shouted, and followed this with a string of blistering Novigi invective of which I caught only one word in five. From those, I gathered Lys didn't think much of Videc's mother.

The guard hauled Lys out of the cell and over to the exit door with brutal efficiency, given that Lys was twisting and hissing like a nyma on the rampage.

"Where are you taking him?" I cried.

The only answer was the heavy boom of the metal door closing.

I sat and tried to determine a course of action. It was idiotic, to say the least, as there was nothing I could do, no way to get the attention of my gaolers. I ignored the thick press of thirst and the metal tang of hunger, and considered what Tywyll might do in my situation. That only got me shaking; if they had Tywyll, they'd have everything they wanted, and all would be lost. *I* would be lost. So, I stopped thinking of Tywyll and thought of Cynar instead, of what we had begun together, of whether we'd get the chance to continue, of his river-bottom eyes and round bottom. I let the flood of memories invade and wash over me.

I drifted within my memories of Cynar, prickly, proud, perfect Cynar, until the memory of him fighting off Varas after the spring flood presented itself. How astonished I'd been that he would ingratiate himself with my venal neighbor! How much more astonished I'd been that he used that deception

to punish the man who'd insulted him and threatened our safety. By the time the door opened again, in the sullen gloom of twilight I had a course of action in mind. Whether it would work, was another matter.

It was Rosh himself who came for me, with the ever-present Guarnir at his elbow.

"Videc has summoned you," he said when he reached my cell.

I was already standing. "Should I feel honored you came to escort me yourself?"

My light tone would have earned me a cuff from Guarnir, had the gate to the cell been open yet. As it was, I paused and added, "Rosh-pan," to my greeting, trying to emulate Cynar's purr as I did so.

The effect was comical, but neither black-uniformed man laughed.

As we walked, I resisted freeing any of the desperate questions clogging my throat. Where was Lys, could I see him, what was that scientist doing to him, could we go home? Please?

My silence worked in my favor. "Your info checked out," Rosh said as he steered me down a flight of stairs into a part of the building I hadn't seen before.

"Your little friend isn't being very cooperative," he added.

"Don't blame him," I muttered, and braced for Guarnir's cuff to the back of my head. He didn't disappoint.

"Videc's not a patient man," Rosh continued as if I hadn't spoken at all. "He's here from the Alliance synod itself, you know."

I didn't, but I nodded as if I knew all about it. Apparently, command hadn't wrung the barracks gossip out of Rosh.

"Hell of a plan they have, and the biggest piece of it still on the loose. Your friend is the only one they've managed to get."

*Good*, I wanted to say. "They're not a numerous people," I said, to keep him talking. We traveled a long hallway, a tunnel, really. It was longer than the building. We were underground. Something about that knowledge chilled me.

"The domes are filling up faster than they can build them," Rosh was still talking. I nodded; I knew better than most what went into building a dome. "Some Productives have to be housed outside, to insure the elite get their bellies filled."

His disdain for the domes was dangerous, but not surprising. After all, the Salter contingents had only been co-opted in the last year. I relished this bit of intelligence. The Alliance wasn't as monolithic as this new station, with its new insignia, implied.

"If Videc can't get what he needs from your friend, this phase of the plan can't continue." I couldn't tell what was Rosh's opinion of that possibility. My gut told me he wanted this Videc to fail, but for personal reasons.

"Officious little prick," Guarnir added under his breath from behind me. Rosh couldn't have heard him, but I did.

"Here we are."

We stood before a single door at the end of the tunnel. A bunker of sorts? I waited while Rosh fiddled with the lock, reminded myself of my plan to ingratiate myself until an opening presented itself, and stepped through.



The bright light within had me blinking. I was disoriented enough not to notice that Rosh and Guarnir didn't linger to announce me, just slammed the door and left.

The first thing I registered was that the bunker more closely resembled an operating theater than an office, interrogation room, or torture chamber, and was therefore nothing like I'd expected.

"Mèco," a voice croaked from my left.

There was something else I hadn't expected. "Lys!" I cried and started in his direction. Before I reached him, pain exploded in my back and my knees cracked against the hard floor.

"Edor, designation four-six-seven, former Prime, turfed for sedition, blamed for two deaths of subordinate Edors. Welcome." A silky voice reached me inside the grey haze of pain that lingered above my kidney.

"Please, sit." A chair appeared as if by magic. I levered myself off the floor and sat, panting, my eyes sliding immediately in Lys direction. He was sitting as well, covered with some sort of drape, staring at me with summer-sky eyes the size of lily pads.

"Your loyalty to your pet is touching," the voice said. "But you can't reach him, so don't try." A touch pad stylus went spinning across my vision, only to trip a cord of infrared light which buzzed briefly and sent the small instrument smoking to the floor.

Crisp heel-taps carried the black-clad Videc into my line of sight, blocking my view of Lys. I tried to crane my neck, but

the residual pain in my lower back brought me back to the center of my chair in a hurry.

"Hurts, yes?" Videc sat on a stool, looming over me like a carrion bird. He was all I could see, unless I looked up. There were only blinding lights above me, so there was no relief there. My instinct was to look down, but I wouldn't give this kirottu scientist the satisfaction. I looked into his face for the first time.

The lights from above shadowed his eye sockets, giving him a ghoulish look, but even with that effect I could see my adversary was a handsome man. Tall, slender, intelligent-looking. Sleek. Cleaner and better groomed than I was or had been at almost any point since my turfing.

"You've formed an attachment since you were turned out of your dome, Edor," he observed mildly, as if I were a pet who'd learned a simple trick. "But to an outsider? One such as this?" He waved his elegant hand in the direction of the chair to which Lys was, I now saw, bound wrist and ankle. Lys' eyes were huge—I could see their color from across the room—but he wasn't looking at me. He was just ... staring.

Videc had reverted to looking at me as if I were a slightly disgusting animal, one who might shit on his shoes. My plan to be ingratiating, to lull my adversary with charm, having failed before it began, I seriously considered the shitting on shoes option.

"Your pet has a most intriguing response to metal," Videc said from above me.

"You didn't—" My words dried in my throat as Videc waved again and a subordinate I hadn't noticed before detached

herself from an instrument panel and advanced on Lys with a pair of forceps. Metal ones.

"No!" I cried. "You mustn't!"

Lys scream split the air between us and the drape that covered him fell away to reveal his naked body covered with tiny red burns.

"Monster!" I accused, fighting through the pain in my back to stand and face Videc.

"Oh, nonsense, Edor," he said with an indulgent smile. "Our efforts to examine this specimen were met with great resistance, and we only discovered his unusual ... allergy after completing much of our examination. My assistant thought his lack of cooperation due to animal stubbornness, not real pain."

"Then you're an idiot," I said flatly. "Why keep hurting him now that you know?" I hated that my curiosity bled into my question. I had meant to make that an accusation, too.

Videc slid his hooded gaze from Lys in the chair to me before him. "To show you I can," he said. "If you have become attached to this creature, perhaps you know some of the secrets I seek. You will cooperate, won't you?"

"No." I wanted to shout it, to deny I would cooperate. Instead it came out a whisper, a plaintive "please, don't" in place of a defiant "don't you dare." I was already feeling the shame of the torture victim.

For an answer, Videc signaled casually to his associate and Lys screamed again. I didn't see what she did because I didn't take my gaze from Videc's. I moved forward fractionally, and

so did he, the rod he'd used to shock me coming up between us. I backed down.

"What is he to you," he asked. I could tell he noted the tears of fury and helplessness standing in my eyes.

"He is my farmhand," I tried, using the line I had on Rosh. Videc's eyes narrowed. "My slave," I clarified.

"Your catamite?" he ventured, his lip twisting into a sneer or a leer, I couldn't tell.

I could never make him understand what Lys was to me—to try would be to betray my madi. But I could speak his kirottu language. "I have no dome," I started, infusing my voice with regret. "You honor me with my former designation, but in truth we both know that's lost to me as well. I have no home but my mean little farm, no meaningful work but filling my own belly. What else am I to do but take a bed mate as the taon scum do?"

"But a male?" Videc didn't sound incredulous, merely intrigued. "And little more than an animal?" He uttered a mirthless laugh. "You might as well mount that filthy beast you arrived with." He looked from Lys to me and shook his head. *Such a waste*, he seemed to think.

I gritted my teeth. Lys needed me to be clever, and strong.

When I said nothing for a long moment, Videc continued, pacing the length of the room along the barrier formed by the light-cordon.

"He speaks, after a fashion, so he must be sentient. Do you speak his language?"

"No, Videc-pan," I replied, and it was mostly the truth.

"Have you been unable to teach him to speak Almen?"

"Yes, sir, quite unable," I said and caught Lys eye. This time, he was looking at me. Our eyes held for the briefest beat, and I thought I saw him nod at me. He wouldn't speak to these people. Then they would need both of us.

Videc continued to pace, continued to block my view of Lys. I know he saw me trying to look through him, to keep my view of my *madi* constant.

"What do you know of the ways of these Novigi?" Videc asked abruptly. There was a lot at stake, I knew, and if Videc was pressuring Rosh for results, then someone even more powerful must be pressuring Videc.

I answered honestly. "I know nothing of Novigi ways."

"How did you come to own him?"

"I bought him from a neighbor."

"That would be Varas? Putative Novigi expert?"

"Yes." He would get no more 'Videc-pan' from me.

"He said he sold you two of them."

"Varas was prone to exaggeration," I said. Tywyll would have been proud that I found a way to mask the truth with a lesser truth.

"He was a coarse man, yes, but credible in his way. Where is the second Novigi?"

I must have hesitated too long, for the assistant did something by Lys' chair and his scream nearly undid me.

"Vjellja!" was the word on that scream.

"I buried another Novigi on my land," I said. "Stop what you're doing to him!"

"Varas said this one had a double, a mate, and that together they'd brought your land to productivity. Where is that double?"

"There is no double!" I insisted. Videc raised his eyes to the low ceiling, the way a parent might in the face of a toddler's obstinacy. The shock-rod rested loosely in his hand, and without thinking I took a terrible chance. I lunged at the cordon of infrared light. Where I expected the fine rays to burn, they sliced. Where I expected to push through, they held. The edges of my vision began to throb bright and dark, and I realized I'd made a terrible mistake.

The last thing I saw before Videc cut the power to the cordon and let me fall, was Lys' stricken face. The last thing I heard was my name.

\* \* \* \*

I couldn't have been unconscious for very long, as Lys was still screaming when I awoke, strapped to the chair I'd been sitting in before. I was streaming blood from numerous thin slashes covering me chest to thighs.

"He's a feisty one, isn't he?" Videc's assistant muttered as she injected my arm with something. I hadn't seen her cross the cordon's barrier.

"What is that?" I demanded, dismayed at how weak my voice sounded.

She didn't answer.

I looked over at Lys. His entire body was bowed away from his chair, the dark bonds cutting into his flesh, turning it

white under the pressure. His eyes were screwed shut and his mouth was stretched in a scream that went on and on.

"Lys!" I called. He needed to open his eyes. "Lys, I'm all right." It was a lie, one that would be obvious the moment he looked at me, but it got the result I needed. If these scientists thought Lys was too volatile, I feared they'd destroy him. I needed him to calm down.

"You're an idiot, khari," were the first words he spoke. His eyes, red and wet, were fixed on my chest, where the worst of my wounds showed through my shredded shirt.

His body was covered with welts and blisters from his "examination" and torture.

"I couldn't watch them do that to you, madi," I said, as softly as I could, reluctant to betray that Lys and I could, in fact, communicate.

"Enough." Videc's cool face came between me and Lys. "Touching, but enough. You have information that will help us, Edor. Your catamite is unable or unwilling to cooperate. Perhaps he can convince you."

"He'll die if you keep this up," I rasped.

"He'll die if you don't give me what I need," he replied in a sick parody of a patient singsong. He cast a look at his assistant, and for a moment, I saw a wariness there. Or, perhaps it was disgust. There must be a reason he left the dirty work of 'interrogation' to her.

He nodded his head once and stepped back, clearing my view of Lys. Lys had stopped screaming and was staring at Videc's assistant, his chest heaving like a bellows. I tore my gaze from him and looked at her.

She held something wrapped around her hands. She approached me and without a word let drop a series of slender, knotted chains attached to a wooden handle. They tinkled almost prettily as she swung them gently back and forth before my eyes.

"A whip, of sorts," came Videc's voice in my ear. I hadn't noticed him move. "Imagine what it will do to him."

I did.

Recalling Rosh's careless words about Videc needing Lys to move forward with Alliance plans, I made another decision. "He'd rather die than give you what you want," I panted. "So would I." Never mind that our deaths would leave Cynar and Tywyll alone and unaware of the danger to them and Ikhaya. I was gambling on the belief that Videc wouldn't risk our deaths.

I tried to catch Lys' eye, to let him know I was bluffing.

"Somehow I doubt that," Videc purred into my ear. The man was cannier even than I'd given him credit for. In my beloved old books, I had read about mad scientists, those whose obsessions always proved their downfall in the end. This man, though, struck me as chillingly sane.

"His magic won't work if he's too badly damaged," I said, and the truth gave my words a hard ring my bluff hadn't had.

Videc cocked his head to one side, regarding me like a bird would a grub. "How bad is too badly?" he asked, as if he really was curious.

"Don't get too excited," he said, addressing his assistant. "I'm not yet ready to let you find out."



Ah, there it was. A key of sorts—Videc did not share his assistant's relish for the pain of others. He was a scientist, his tone implied, while she was a torturer. Their skill sets intersected, but only to a point.

The assistant stepped away from me again, returned to Lys' side, and, ignoring the words of her Prime, began drawing the tails of the chain whip gently over his shoulders and arms.

New, welts, pink and angry, appeared on his skin. I made myself watch. She drew back to striking distance and made a few, whistling passes in the air between us. She hadn't hit him yet—what would those chains do to my madi with the force of impact behind them? She raised her arm, and Lys' high, desperate whine broke me.

"Stop!" I screamed. Her arm froze. "Stop, please," I whispered, thoroughly defeated. "That will do it. Whipping him with that will destroy him. He'll be no use to you."

"Now you're telling me what I need to know," Videc said, the quiet triumph in his voice making me hate myself.

"Ask ... ask him..." Lys panted from his chair. I strained to hear him, to understand. "He doesn't need me," he finished.

"No," Videc ground out. "We need the pair of you, you and your twin."

"You could simply learn to farm again, as I have," I suggested.

The assistant snorted and drew back her arm for another strike at Lys. I sucked in a breath to protest, but Videc's voice cut it short. "Hold!"

She turned to him with narrow eyes, only lowering her whip arm very slowly, almost insolently.

"Who's Prime here?" he muttered. He turned to me. "This new Alliance will bring great things, but the domes now have the responsibility to feed the new Alliance taons."

I wondered why he was telling me this. The first glimmer of understanding reached me. "You can't extend the dome methods of food production to the taons," I observed.

"It's logistically, technologically, impossible," he agreed. "The land was dead, so old food production methods were abandoned."

"I know," I growled. Lys looked grey, limp, after his most recent ordeal. He might be at the height of his powers, but these people were stronger still, and ruthless. I forced myself to work out some of what Videc was telling me. If I couldn't engage his compassion, perhaps I could appeal to the frustrated scientist in him. "Now that you know the land can be revived, you see opportunities for population growth outside the domes."

He nodded to me, then to his assistant, who came over with a tray and began painfully spraying my wounds with what I hoped was a healing agent. I hissed.

"If dome Productives are to be asked to live outside the domes, they must be given assurances they will have some modicum of comfort," Videc explained.

I understood. Until this Alliance began, living outside the dome was punishment, was meant for lesser beings than domers.

"You think good food will coax people to relocate? You're a fool."

I knew I was taking a chance, speaking to Videc as an equal. He was only giving me as much information as he thought would inspire my cooperation, after all. He must be more desperate for a breakthrough than I had thought.

"This Alliance put the cart before the horse, didn't it?" I said, knowing I had the right of it. I thought back to my days as an architect in the dome, to the way we Productives had held bureaucrats and their inexplicable decisions in contempt. Videc might be a Hierarchy, one of the highest order of Productives, but I was betting he was a scientist before all. His strange relationship with his assistant was evidence of that. So, I appealed to the scientist in him. "The Salter army is meant to enforce this new order," I began. "The Hierarchs gave them teeth but no leash, didn't they? Now they're afraid their dogs will turn on them if proper rewards aren't forthcoming. You have an impossible job, Videc." I shook my head and relaxed back into my chair. The look on his face told me I'd struck the nerve closest to the bone for him.

"Now they have me chasing fairy tales on the word of a filthy grub."

*Varas*, I thought.

"We could develop agricultural methods, given time," he seemed to muse to himself.

"But there's no time," I commiserated. "They want you to do miracles, not science."

Maybe I went too far, stroking his ego. Lys caught my eye from across the room. Some of the pain-dullness in his eyes

was gone. I smiled for him. I knew miracles could happen, had seen them.

"Can these Novigi do magic?" Videc broke in.

"No," I said, masking the truth a little. "They have a special bond to whatever land they call home, and that bond helps the land flourish. They also work very hard. Living on the land is hard work." I wouldn't say anything about the amichu bond, or the annual cycle of waxing and waning a pair of amichus traveled. Much of the 'magic' we'd worked at Ikhaya was to do with keen observation of the land and its inhabitants, canny stewardship, and not a little luck.

"That bond, can it be reproduced?" Videc's dark eyes glittered with something like lust.

"I don't know," I answered, quellingly. "I do know Lys will die if he isn't returned to his home." *If he isn't returned to Tywyll*, I thought. I still hoped we could go home without betraying Tywyll and Cynar. "If he does, you'll have nothing, you know. You'll have failed."

He gave me a disgusted look. "There are other Novigi," he said. "Others might cooperate."

"You're bluffing," I said with a confidence I didn't feel. If Lys and Tywyll had been enslaved in a taon, and Cynar had grown up in one, then more Novigi might well become available to the new Alliance. "Most Novigi living among the Alm have no knowledge of the ways of their ancestors. Just like us, they have forgotten, have moved on."

"Then perhaps Novigi living outside Alm territory could be approached, be brought into the Alliance." Videc's voice was speculative, though his words chilled me.

Lys shook his head, a grim smile on his face. "You'll never find any true Novigi," he said.

"I found you," Videc replied airily. He turned to me. "Will he really die, even if we treat his wounds?"

"Yes," I said, letting all the bleakness I felt seep into the word.

"You say the magic is mostly in the method," he pressed. "In ways that can be taught?"

I nodded.

"Then I believe I must see this home of yours for myself."

Lys' face went even grayer. He moaned and vomited in his chair.

"Clean him up," Videc said to his silent assistant, who was gagging in response to Lys' mess. Served her right.

"We leave at dawn," Videc declared.

"Sir?" the assistant said, incredulous.

"You may report to your *handlers* as you see fit," he said, in that silky voice he'd first used on me. Something in me rejoiced at this minor declaration of independence on his part. The torturer left without saying a word, slamming the door heavily.

As Videc unbound me from my chair and set about freeing Lys as well, my stomach seemed to split in two, half of it leaping in joy to be going home, the other half plummeting in horror at what would happen to Ikhaya now I'd betrayed it so completely.

I didn't vomit as Lys had, but it was a near thing.

\* \* \* \*

Within hours, we were bundled into a transport vehicle, our wounds bound along with our hands and feet.

A hastily detailed Salter detachment accompanied us, and so did Videc.

Ruki, a feed bag strapped over his snout, was loaded into a trailer that traveled behind us. We forded the river at the earliest opportunity, and would approach Ikhaya by land when the time came.

Now that Lys and I were together and could speak with relative freedom, I found I was at a loss for words.

We rode in silence, my shame puddling around us like muddy water, until nightfall. We stopped only long enough for a change of drivers and a quick piss, then drove on. At this rate, we'd be home before two nights passed.

Whenever the truck stopped, Videc climbed into the wooden bed of the truck with us and, with a light touch that surprised me after the brutality of the interrogation room, cleaned and re-dressed our hurts, then retreated to his spot in the huge cab with the three Salters. I hadn't spoken a word to him since giving him what he wanted.

"Midsummer night," Lys murmured, low enough for only me to hear, though in truth the engine noise must have masked our conversation. His injuries, like mine, were confined to the front of his body, so we both lay on our backs. I kept my face turned away from him.

"Khari, I'm sorry."

It was the last thing I was expecting to hear, and it pulled my head around to look into eyes brimming with tears.

"You did nothing wrong, madi. Nothing, you understand?"

"You're blaming yourself," he said with a hitch in his voice. "But if I hadn't trusted Varas, gone to the river with him when he said the majava kits were hurt..."

"So that's how he got you," I said, trying hard to keep a smile out of my voice. "I wondered what made you leave the navdi. They would have protected you."

He nodded in the twilight. "It's my fault I got taken, my fault you followed me, my fault I couldn't withstand their torture." He subsided into a miserable silence.

I rolled over, biting the inside of my cheek to keep from moaning aloud at the pain, and opened my arms. He gave a small cry and rolled toward me. We pressed our bellies together very softly, then our chests, then our lips and hips.

"Shh," I soothed. "You're at the height of your energies right now. If you couldn't stand against their tactics, no one could." I sighed, still feeling guilty. "I certainly couldn't."

I felt a small, tearful smile slide against my throat. "You just didn't want to face Tywyll if they really hurt me."

"True," I conceded. "You think they're all right?" I had worried since leaving Ikhaya about Tywyll experiencing his midsummer nagir alone with Cynar.

"Those two have the most ... prickly relationship," Lys said, picking up my thought. "But Cynar's a fierce one. He'll protect my vjellja." I heard what Lys didn't say: that *he* should be there to do the protecting himself.

"We'll be there soon enough, madi," I said. "What will Cynar and Tywyll say about our guests?" I kept my voice a whisper, still fearing the unlikelihood someone would hear us discussing people we'd sworn didn't exist.

"We'll just have to find a way to explain it before they think we're in danger and attack." Of course, we *were* in danger, all of us, and it took me a moment of narrow staring into Lys' eyes before a small smile broke in them. My heart thrilled that Lys could joke, even grimly, about our situation.

There were so many ways things could go wrong, and with Tywyll at his weakest and Cynar in protector mode, we were in for a fight no matter what transpired on our return home. I lost a few moments wondering whether Cynar would blame himself for my injuries, whether he would become Hawk to my Boy, and his remorse—or my fear of it—would destroy our love. I came back to myself when the truck bounced through a rut in the road, slamming us painfully to the wooden bed.

"Sleep, now," I said, petting Lys' filthy hair. "I'll take first watch." He smelled ripe and sick, as I'm sure I did, but I wouldn't be parted from him.

Neither of us trusted Videc or the brutish soldiers. There was no way I'd sleep, even if I was forced to admit there was nothing I could do if the Salters tried to take Lys from me again. He felt the same, and so we sacrificed sleep for the illusion of safety.

Morning came, and with it more of Videc's unwelcome but necessary attentions. His hands on me were bad enough; seeing them on Lys brought a scowl to my face and a growl to my voice.

"I've brought some breakfast," he said in his crisp voice.

I growled again. "Untie us at least. Let us eat like men."

He considered for a moment before nodding decisively.

"Certain death if you jump," he said, and then walked



awkwardly on his knees to the rear flap of the truck and called out to the soldiers, one of whom ambled over and unceremoniously cut our bonds, burning Lys afresh in the process.

Through the day, I sensed a change in Videc. He made no move to engage us in conversation during his visits. He seemed to have left all thought of interrogation behind at the Alliance garrison. I remembered his frustration at the dome Hierarchs and their short sightedness.

"You've never been away from a Hierarchy before?" I ventured when he brought our midday meal.

"I've never been free," he said, as if to himself. His eyes were startled when he looked at me.

I cocked an eye in the direction of our Salter escort. "You'll say too much," I cautioned. "They'll think you've got above yourself." I couldn't keep the sarcasm out of my voice.

"Khari," Lys scolded.

"Sorry, madi," I said. "It's just that he..."

"I know," Lys whispered.

We ate our lunch, casting wary glances at Videc as we did. Years seemed to drop off him as we traveled until he looked as young as Cynar. If he hadn't still worn the black Alliance uniform, I could have believed him any young man on any journey, grateful for a ride to ease his distance. I counseled myself that this impression was an illusion, that Videc was as dangerous as he had been in his torture chamber. Indeed, such counsel was easy to keep when my stitches pulled with every breath.

Still, with daylight, and moving air, my mood improved, and I was strong enough by afternoon to pull Lys up against my chest to watch the landscape change as we neared Ikhaya.

"It looks so different out here!" Videc exclaimed through the rear window of the cab, as unguarded as a boy. I hadn't realized it could open, and was glad of my earlier caution when Lys and I had spoken.

I looked at him closely. "That's Ikhaya," I said simply, not bothering to raise my voice to compensate for the engine's roar or the truck's rattle.

"It's beautiful, is it not?" Lys beamed at our erstwhile captor.

*Captor no more*, I reminded myself sternly. *Still, the one who holds our safety in his tattooed hand.*

"I've never seen a green place," the scientist said, smiling back. It was an effort not to like him, then, or at least to pity him.

Just at that moment, something thudded into the side of our truck, causing the Salters in front to shout and Ruki behind us to bray.

Lys stretched down, grimacing against the pull of healing flesh, to retrieve something from the bed of the trailer. "Ulu bolt," he declared, triumphantly waving the sharpened stick.

We were under attack by our own lovers!

\* \* \* \*

Something hard and heavy hit the side of the truck bed, vibrating the wooden panel where we pressed against it, my body covering Lys' as best it could.

"That's no ulu bolt!" I hissed as another thud rocked the bed from the other side. "They're throwing stones, too"

"And from more than two directions," Lys hissed back. He made to raise his head to look, but I pulled him down.

"Madi, they can't know it's us! How could they? They'll shoot you first and regret it later."

An ulu bolt is no bullet, but still it can kill. Lys nodded reluctantly and stayed put.

The truck veered wildly as the driver was hit. The careening dislodged Ruki's trailer and it rolled to a stop, its passenger bellowing indignantly.

Lys and I were buffeted from side to side as the new driver—I saw the body of the original tumble into the dirt—tried to regain control of the vehicle.

My hand found purchase near the cab's rear window and I was able to shout to Videc. "Get him to stop!"

He shook his head, the whites of his eyes flashing, and motioned me back down.

"They're stampeding the avalas!" Lys reported the next time I had to yank him down beside me.

Sure enough, a clot of wooly bodies came across the truck's path, causing the driver to swerve again. This time Lys and I held on to our slightly more protected position. I felt blood tickle its way down my belly where my stitches had torn.

Next came shots. The driver was white-knuckling the steering wheel, but his remaining companion shoved Videc down into the foot well and aimed out the window. Over his shoulder, I saw an avala fall, bright blood blooming on its dusty fur, legs twisting as it went down. Its fellows scattered in the path of a bullet as they hadn't for an oncoming truck.

I reached through the window and made a grab for the shooter's collar, but missed.

"Idiot! Get down!" It wasn't Lys, but Videc, who admonished me. I met his eyes at awkward angles, me peering in through the rear window, him craning up from the floor of the cab. Something flashed there.

"Hold on!" he yelled. I was sure the Salters thought he shouted to them. But I grabbed Lys with one hand and the window frame with the other.

As I watched, Videc jammed his arm backwards and grasped the shift lever, pulling it violently out of gear. Lys and I were thrown against the rear of the cab as the truck bucked and slowed.

I thought I heard Videc scream. I know I heard more shots.

I didn't wait for the truck to slow enough for the driver to throw it into gear again. As soon as I could make out individual blades of grass, I hauled Lys over the side with me, landing hard on the ground.

I tried, I really did, to shield Lys from the brunt of the impact. For the second time that day, loss of consciousness threatened when it counted most.

"Need you, khari." Lys' demand was accompanied by an ungentle slap to my cheek.

"Ow!" I protested, rubbing my face.

His hand covered mine. "We can't help if we can't see what's going on. Look where we are!"

I picked up my head and looked around us. The truck had been traveling along the river, and had approached Ikhaya from the north. We weren't yet within sight of the turvy or even the bean fields, but there, above us, was our tree house.

"Can you climb?" I asked Lys.

"You'll help," he said.

I did and, painful minutes later, we lay as flat as we could without lying on our bellies and peered out over the landscape.

As battles went, it wasn't much. Three Salters against two Novigi and a herd of avala. After his stunt with the truck, I was no longer sure on whose side Videc should be counted. Indeed, I hadn't been sure of his loyalty to the Alliance since we'd departed Haetta.

One Salter was dead or unconscious back where the ulu bolts had first hit the truck. Another hung awkwardly from the passenger door of the truck, flopping out a little further with each jounce and swerve. When he finally fell out, it was without his gun. That, I could see trained on the driver. Had Tywyll or Cynar been foolish enough to clamber aboard the truck?

"It's Videc!" Lys breathed next to me.

"Kirottu scientist," I said, admiration, confusion, and residual hatred crowding my throat.

"There's Tywyll!" If Lys wasn't still weak from climbing to safety, I would have had a hard time keeping him beside me. As it was, he relaxed against me with little protest.

"Do you see Cynar?"

I looked around, trying to see where he might be. The first ulu bolts had hit the moment we had hit our tree line. "He's probably still in the woods," I said. I tamped down the fear that he had fallen to a Salter's bullet, but Lys sensed it anyway.

"I don't see him on the ground," he assured me. There are no better eyes than those of a bright amichu at midsummer, so I relaxed as well.

"Oh, dear, khari!" Lys said. "Those stones!"

"What stones?"

"The ones that were hitting the truck with the ulu bolts."

I remembered.

"If Tywyll was here, stampeding the avala, and Cynar was in the woods throwing ulus, where did the stones come from?"

"Maybe the wheels kicked them up," I ventured. It was possible.

"They were coming from the sides, not underneath," Lys protested.

I knew that. "Someone else is here," he said. I knew that, too.

Whether it boded good or ill remained to be seen, but I couldn't help adding, "They were fighting on our side."

Lys shot me a skeptical look. "Maybe they're preserving their claim."

"Well, we have guns now," I said, referring to the three Salters' weapons.

"So does Videc," Lys reminded me.

Somehow, I didn't consider that the problem I'd have thought it was just that morning.

"All three Salters are down. Shall we go?"

Lys beamed at me and climbed down first.

I couldn't keep up with him as he ran, whooping, into Tywyll's arms, an exultant stream of Novigi interrupted to the point of incoherence by kiss after kiss.

"No double, indeed," came Videc's voice to my right. It had lost most of its silkiness and rasped harshly.

I smiled while keeping my eyes on a wan but clearly hale Tywyll—Cynar had evidently brought him through his nagir unscathed. "You'll discover I was telling the truth about that. Lys has no double," I said. I turned to him. "Your arm?" He held it clasped to his side, and his face had an ashen pallor.

"I think it broke when I pulled the gear lever. I didn't expect the truck to slow so quickly," he said with a small, shaky laugh.

"We'll sort it. Soon as you hand over that gun," I said.

To my everlasting surprise, he did.

"Monstrous thing," he muttered, using his newly freed hand to cradle his hurt arm more securely.

"Funny, that's exactly what I'd have called you, yesterday," I said. It was the closest to an accord we'd reach that day.

"What are you looking for?" Videc broke in.

"Cynar!" I sighed with relief as the man himself came at a run from the trees to the north.

"You have more than two Novigi?" Videc asked accusingly.

"Evidently, I have ... four?" I didn't bother to clarify that Ikhaya's Novigi were no more mine than its earth or air. I ran as best I could to meet Cynar, who stood a head taller than any of his companions. Those companions were...

"Children?" I gasped. That was my last word for a while, as I had an armload of Cynar kissing me fiercely.

Despite the pain in my stitches, I would have enjoyed the press of his body against mine for far longer than he allowed me.

He pulled away with a grin that bordered on a grimace. "You did it, *muliañ*."

I thrilled to hear him call me 'beloved.' But then he scowled and shook me. "But you're hurt."

I must have looked shamefaced. He followed my gaze to Lys, who was still enwrapped in Tywyll's embrace. "Both of you are injured?"

At my nod, he released me, holding on with one hand only—one hand too little, if I were honest—and gestured behind him.

"Good thing I found us hands to help with the harvest," he said.

I looked for the first time at the small gaggle of half-grown children of various sizes and uniform scruffiness.

At my quizzical looks, Cynar supplied, "They fetched up on a raft two nights ago."



The night before Tywyll's nagir, I thought. *I should have been here.*

"Saw your tree house from the river." The eldest, evidently the leader, stepped forward and brandished a slingshot. "Figured we could handle whatever we found, so we came ashore."

Something about the boy made me look at him more closely. His skin had a grayish cast, almost blue in the advancing evening light, and as I watched the color shifted the tiniest bit. The effect was of clouds crossing a clear sky.

I looked at Cynar. "Novigi?" I asked incredulously.

"So it seems," my lover replied, with something like pride in his voice. "His name's Myrni."

I itched to ask more. I yearned to take Cynar back into my arms for a more complete reunion. But neither of those desires was to be satisfied for some time yet.

A sharp report split the air and I turned too fast for my stitches, gasping. With Cynar's steadying hand on my back, I looked across the field to the hulk of the truck. Beside it, hair wild, Tywyll stood over the body of the last Salter, a curl of smoke twisting into the air from the muzzle of the gun in his hand, which was prudently covered by the tail of his shirt—this was no hot-blooded killing. Beside him, Lys knelt, his hand on the Salter's neck. He raised solemn eyes to his amichu and nodded his head. The last Salter was, evidently, dead.

Our battle was over, our home secure, at least for the time being.

As if reading my thought, Cynar said, "They'll be back, you know."

"I know," I said, resigned. "But not today."

And so, trailing a small herd of children and a wary scientist, we crossed to where Lys and Tywyll stood together, looking away from the dead man at their feet.

There was much to discuss, much to decide. Such thoughts crowded me as a thick silence grew between the four of us. In typical fashion, Cynar broke the silence with little ceremony and less finesse.

"Plenty of day left. Let's go home." He fixed me with his pale gaze. "All the way home. There's work to do."

\* \* \* \*

Hours later, though it felt like days, I climbed the ladder to the tree platform with Cynar. We sat, breathing together, letting the events of the day sink into memory and new plans for Ikhaya coalesce.

The children, led by the startling Myrni, had been bundled into the big bed in the turvy, apparently as accustomed to sleeping in a puppy pile as I was. Their sheer variety was enough to occupy my thoughts, as they appeared to have been spawned by every population I'd ever heard of in the taons and the hinterland, as well as a few I hadn't.

If Myrni was a puzzle for another day, so was Videc, who was resting now, alone, in the storage shed. He'd thrown himself into helping clear the damage from the battle, including burying the bodies of the Salters, with the zeal of a man with debts to pay. For all the smoothness and assurance

of his superiority he'd shown in the garrison and on the trip to Ikhaya, he was remarkably tractable when Tywyll or I gave him something to do. He even sought out Lys, and though I didn't hear what transpired between them, Lys' shoulders lost the rigidity they'd had around the scientist. More than just our bodies were on the mend, I reflected as I tightened my arms around Cynar and inhaled the smoky sunshine and sweat smell of his hair.

"We should teach everyone Novigi," he murmured, in that way he had of giving voice to that part of his thoughts that rose closest to the surface of his mind. I tried to catch that thought, but like one of his river creatures surfacing for a breath before plumbing the depths once more, his conscious attention was as slippery as it was sinuous.

"It would give us one more advantage when strangers come," I said, remembering how I had wished my Novigi skills were stronger in the Alliance gaol. "But we should retain Almen as well, teach it to those children who don't speak it." Cynar gave me a narrow look and I acknowledged with a shrug that I'd assumed the young ones would remain among us. I didn't say speaking Novigi would mark us as targets in some circles, for Cynar knew that as surely as he knew that more Salters would come, that the new Alliance would send them just as surely as frost follows fall. Perhaps we'd have until next spring before the dead Salters were missed, their fate pieced together by their handlers, and more dispatched. Whatever time we had would have to be enough.

"We will have to train Myrni's band in defense as well as farming," I tried again in an effort to engage Cynar in the desultory conversation.

But he was having none of it. His hands rode up and down my thighs, his back arched slightly forward to accommodate my injuries. I deployed my own hands in a campaign up and down his arms, across his chest, and lower to lay tender siege to his belly and groin.

"Ah, Mèco," Cynar sighed. "I missed you."

"I missed you, too," I breathed. "So very much." I squeezed him to me, angling my head to nip at the muscle on the side of his neck. "So very much. I feared I'd never do this again."

"I feared you were shirking," he teased. He'd already lit into me for getting myself hurt when there was work to be done, and I smiled at his clumsy affection.

"The harvest or loving you?" I teased back, swearing I'd never take the opportunity for granted again.

"Your choice," he said. "Do that some more." And he held my head to his throat.

"You took good care of Tywyll," I praised.

"He's my kusheri, after all," he said while doing something imaginative to my nipples. "I only did what any cousin would."

"And you've made the children welcome," I continued, giving voice to a fact which, frankly, surprised and delighted me in equal measure. "I haven't seen a child since I was one myself," I continued, not letting up on my caresses.

"I thought you could do with some new fauna to domesticate," he said. I dug my fingers into his hair and worked it loose, combing it over and over when I found it made him twist and gasp.

"Wouldn't want me to get bored?" I asked, laughing lightly when his fingers left my chest and he turned so he could reach the join of my trousers. His shifting removed my hands from where they had begun kneading his cock and balls through his pants, so I cast about among my repertoire for something else to fan his desire.

"Kiss me?" Cynar said, solving my problem for me.

With the first press of our lips, all thought of the future, of Ikhaya's security, of the children and the harvest, scattered as chaff under a flail. The mad, delicate twist of our tongues drove away worry and pain and weariness, leaving only bright coals of wanting and the dark grind of need.

"Oh, vjellja, look at them!"

Tywyll's low growl followed Lys exclamation, and when Cynar would have pulled back from our kiss, I pulled him closer to me and made further demands. Let them watch.

I was so lost in Cynar's mouth I barely felt a warm body insinuate itself behind me, or strong hands burrow into my hair from Cynar's side to pull our faces apart.

"Wha...?" I managed to protest only to find my head brought round and a new set of lips descend. "Lomi," I breathed, knowing Tywyll's mouth even so close and in such dark. Our kiss was brief, broken by Lys, who wanted kisses of his own from each of us.

Things got messy after that. Four heads can't bring eight lips together without noses knocking and foreheads bumping.

Cynar got us all moving with urgent presses of hands and whispered imprecations. I ended up on my back, nude, covered by touches and kisses and insistent, muscular, embraces all up and down my body. My prick was hard enough to wring tears from my eyes, and somehow, with all those hands and mouths—and all that skin—available, it went untouched. The unfairness of it struck me funny, and so it was through breathless giggles that I tried to sit up and beg.

"Please, one of you, touch me!"

"Poor khari," Lys soothed. "Kusheri, you do it, yes? Injuries or no, I need fucking."

Tywyll added his own dark chuckle to the music of voices and bodies, and pulled Lys a little away, rolling him onto his back and positioning himself over Lys, arms braced so only their mouths and pricks touched. The sight was stunning, and for a few heartbeats I forgot the need gripping me.

But only for a few heartbeats. Cynar made sure I remembered his presence—and that he was essential to my relief—by toppling me backward and latching on to my nipple. "Watching you watch them is inspiring most nights," he said, and every word set his teeth to my flesh. "But tonight I want all of you."

I knew what he meant. It seemed a lifetime and not just a quarter moon since we'd been in this very place, contemplating this very act.

"Then you shall have me, muliañ," I assured him, settling on my back as comfortably as I could and spreading my legs.

"All of me." I would not be Boy to his Hawk, cowering in the wake of injuries; nor would I become the Hawk, suffering exile for the hurt I brought. For tonight, at least, we were safe from old stories.

Cynar's face was above mine, his eyes ethereally lit by the waning moon, his lips and teeth glinting. I waited for a kiss. Instead, something thumped my shoulder hard enough to distract me from Cynar's intentions.

"For you, khari," came Tywyll's amused voice. "Or for your kibi."

It was a bottle of herbed oil, crushed and distilled by Lys as Tywyll's midsummer gift.

Holding the rough clay bottle in my hand made very real the thing I was about to do. "This will help me let you in, muliañ," I said to Cynar.

He grinned at me, a flash in the silvery light, and then went very serious again. "I won't hurt you," he said, ghosting his fingers over the rough lines of stitching and scabs bisecting my midsection.

"Nor I, you," I said. I knew how vulnerable I had felt during the months of becoming part of the sharing of bodies and spirits Lys and Tywyll took for granted and counted as blessing. Cynar might be feeling something akin to that. I wanted him to feel safe.

"Always protecting me," he said.

"Since when do you read my thoughts?" I countered, leaning up finally to claim the kiss he still withheld.

The sweet hum he gave back tickled my lips and sparked down my bones, making them shake.

Without breaking the connection of our mouths, Cynar reached between us with slippery fingers. I tried to accommodate him without pulling my stitches or dislodging him. It all looked so effortless when Lys and Tywyll fucked, like a well-choreographed dance or a perfect hunt. I felt clumsy and awkward.

"Cy-agh!" I grunted—not graceful or alluring in the least—when I felt one of Cynar's hard fingers find, then breach, my hole. Immediately, he pulled back, an even more startling sensation, like being turned inside out.

"Liar," Cynar soothed, stroking my face and chest, dropping kisses all over. "Said this wouldn't hurt." He was talking about himself.

"Again, kibi," I said, deliberately using his "puppy" nickname, and drew his hand back between my legs. In the near distance, I could hear Lys' distinctive keening and understood that Tywyll had brought him all the way home.

"You promised, kibi," I reminded Cynar when he tried to pull his hand back from my ass.

"So I did," he agreed.

I smiled at his grim determination. "Try this," I said and pressed up against him until he got the idea and raised up off me. I rolled under him and raised my hips. I rubbed back and forth, feeling the soft press of his balls and the hard, hopeful jut of his prick. "Now, more of Lys' magic oil."

This was a better position, though I mourned the loss of his eyes burrowing into mine. I held my weight and protected my sore belly, and he was able to focus on his task.



What focus it was, too. His hands were everywhere for a few minutes, as if mapping my body in this new pose. But then they settled over my hips, spreading my cheeks and blowing lightly. I shivered. I hadn't expected to feel so ... exposed.

In went one finger, the others stroking and pressing into the muscle of my ass and thighs, bumping my balls, which barely swung, they were so full.

"Ah, kibi. Cynar." I wanted to give him something, my voice as an anchor. My words weren't that impressive, but every one was pulled from the deepest heart of me.

"Where's..." Cynar seemed to be talking to himself. "Ah! There." He crowed with satisfaction when I bucked under him. Once he'd found it, he fingered the secret bump inside me relentlessly.

My prick leaked and my balls churned, but I couldn't do anything about them because I needed both hands to hold myself up.

I couldn't ask for what I wanted, because my words had blown away like ash.

I felt Cynar splay both hands widely over my buttocks. I moaned, shaking my head in protest when his fingers left me. But soon they were back, thicker—his thumbs, both of them pressing in and very deliberately opening me, pulling the ring of muscle into the shape he wanted like a potter at a wheel.

"Now?" he asked.

"Uhn," I said, and squeezed my ring around his thumbs. I felt him scramble away and shivered again, this time from the chill on my bare skin.

"Mèco," he said, right beside me.

I turned my head. "Why did you stop?" I found those words through a lustful confusion.

"Tell me yes," he said.

"Yes," I said. "Yes, kibi. Yes."

"Kiss," he said, and we did, hard and breathless.

Lys and Tywyll's soft murmurs reached me as Cynar made his way back behind me. No fingers this time, he planted a wide-mouthed kiss against the cheek of my ass, grazing with his teeth when he pulled away.

I found one more word for him. "Now!"

And there he was. Making a home within me for his prick, setting his balls against mine like boots in a doorway. I didn't feel split open, or invaded, or any of the things I had imagined.

I felt surrounded, encompassed. His prick went into me and became my foundation, and everything I was, was rebuilt around it, around him.

In and still further in, he went, over and over. His hands on my back and shoulders. Oh, and over my hips until they found my prick and pulled at it inexpertly, too hard and too soft by turns, but I didn't care. "Ohh, kibi," I said his name on every breath until I felt him drive home one more time and freeze hard, his strangulated cry of 'Mèco!' tipping me over. I spilled into his hand and onto the rough rug.

"Stay," I ordered when he started to pull out.

It was awkward, and if Lys and Tywyll hadn't been asleep I'm sure they would have commented. I lowered myself by

degrees, bringing Cynar with me, but losing his softening prick in the process.

I decided I loved the feeling of my stretched hole, wet and cool in the night air, dripping his seed warmly down my thigh.

But since I couldn't have him inside me, I wanted something else. "Climb over," I said, and held him tightly to me when he did, settling him in my arms and kissing him sloppily.

"Good?" he asked, and the childlike uncertainty of his question made me laugh out loud. Behind us, Lys stirred with a sleepy murmur, and then subsided. Cynar pinched me for laughing.

"Better than good," I rushed to say. "Better than ... anything."

He nodded wordlessly against my shoulder and I could feel him relax. The summer smells of the river reached me, moist and fecund, and I thought I could hear the navdi howl and yip in the far distance. Starlight and moonlight speckled us through the thick leaves of the he'eva boughs above us. Ikhaya surrounded me, starting with the delicious ache in my ass and extending to include, first Cynar, then Lys and Tywyll, then our land and its inhabitants, new and old, harmless and fearsome. My thoughts drifted, and I smiled blissfully into Cynar's hair.

"You were ... amazing," he said after a spell.

I felt a blush rise, surprising me. I hadn't realized I needed his praise as much as he seemed to need mine. "I'm just an ordinary man, Cynar."

"But extraordinary with it," Cynar said.

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*by Lee Benoit*

"Extraordinary with you," I replied, feeling sleep slur my words. "The three of you and our home."

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