

Snowflakes and Embers
by S.A. Payne

Deseem was to be a gift to God, trained from birth to be a priest but when his father, the king, is short on allies and heirs he's ordered to become a Bentan Bride. Left with no choices and options he braces himself for the worst.

Liam is used to how his magic frightens people and he's learned to like his isolation. He's content being a Watcher and finds real joy in his work. The last thing he wants is a Bentan Bride.

When destiny and chance bring them together they both have to struggle to build a new life.

Snowflakes and Embers

Chapter One

His sandals made scuffing sounds on the stone floor, it was a sound that echoed up to the arched windows that were open to catch the early evening breezes. He liked the sound of his feet moving down the passage to the garden. It echoed and he could almost feel the vibrations of the soft sound like the echoes of a bell, only low and scratchy. The two servants, eunuchs as all the servants that attended him were, followed on bare feet and made no sounds. There hadn't been a single moment of his life when he'd been without at the least one of the bald headed, quiet servants following him around and for the most part he dismissed their presence.

At the entrance to the garden he paused as he did before entering any room with people in it. The servants scuttled forward and fussed at the ritual robe he wore, straightening the way it hung from his shoulders, flicking dust and lint that was barely visible away. Even going so far as to arrange any braid that may have fallen out of line while he walked. Some days he wanted to smack them to make them stop fussing, it was a reflex and one he suppressed. He'd hit a servant once as a young boy for fussing at him. His father had beaten him with his own hand in punishment. Not because he'd smacked a servant but because he'd failed to behave as was proper for a child of the Guiding Star of Bastion. A prince had to be perfection at all moments, or at least make the effort of perfection and it was the bald servant's job to see he came as close as he could. It was his obligation to allow them to fuss. It didn't mean he wasn't grateful each time they stopped and backed away. One hurried forward to open the door for him.

The palace was spotted with gardens, some so tiny that one person filled them, some so sprawling he'd lost himself in them as a child. This one was modestly sized. A fountain spat water into the air and the mosaic tiled walkways curved around green leafy plants that grew well in their arid dry soil. Most weren't flowering sorts, but the shades of green were nearly as stunning and it gave the garden a cool peaceful feel. The sun was low enough now that the garden was shaded but the stones still radiated heat and it gave some defense against the coming chill of full dark.

Set in the center of the garden was a low table with cushions tossed on either side. Down the center was a length of ivory gauze fabric, a double hands width high but a clear break between one side and the other. The table was set for two, each side perfectly mirroring the other so nothing would need to be passed over the small fabric barrier.

Across the table, seated like some beautiful flower with all the leafy green plants behind her, was his sister. Her hair was as elaborately braided as his own, only it was twisted and pulled back and pinned under a sheer length of pale pink covered with heavy gold embroidery. She nearly jumped to her feet, a smile bright and wide danced on her face at seeing him, it made the heavy black lines painted around her eyes crinkle and her equally black eyes glow.

"Deseemdamiah." She greeted almost breathlessly and ignored the female servant that straightened the lengths of lightweight fabric draped around her body. "Brother."

"Marlynnia, sister. How was your day?" He smiled lightly back before lowering himself down onto the cushion on his side of the table. She followed suit and took her own seat and both ignored the swirl of servants that fussed about them.

"Far better now that you've arrived. I was growing concerned, the hour grows late."

"I was kept late at my studies." Deseem answered and was grateful the long sleeves of his robe hid the welts from the cane his teachers and the older priests used to encourage him to learn better. The inside of his lower arms were painful but they'd be better by the morning. "You know I wouldn't miss taking my dinner with you, it's the only enjoyment I have."

"You flatter me too much. Father came and saw me today."

That made him raise his eyebrows ; she seemed intact and whole. Their father only came to visit them when one of them required punishment. "Oh?"

"He's finding me a husband. I won't be long here, brother." Her voice was steady but her tone wasn't pleased.

"Oh." The word was nearly a grunt and would have earned him a welt from his tutors. There was little they hated more than poor skills at communication. This time a welt would have been a welcomed pain, it couldn't have hurt more than the shock of his sister leaving. That was a pain he wasn't prepared for.

"We both knew I would be a wife soon."

He nodded and studied his hands folded in his lap. "I know."

"Please, brother, don't look so sad."

"Should I look joyful? The only person I have to speak with is leaving me. I'll be cloistered alone here."

"It won't be so bad. I'm sure my husband will be kind enough to allow me to visit you."

That was a long shot and Deseem knew it even if she didn't. If his sister was very lucky, her husband would be a kind man but it would be years more before he took a second wife or allowed her the freedom to come visit. She'd have sisters now and servants that could speak to her more freely and he'd still be alone.

That wasn't truths he wanted to share. "Perhaps." He smiled as much as he could force. "I'm happy for you."

"It's what I've been training for."

He heard the uncertainty in her voice and knew her fears. All women were frightened of becoming brides. "You'll make a fine wife."

"Thank you." She smiled and fell silent as servants arrived with trays carrying their dinner. Neither one of them were comfortable speaking too freely in front of too many servants. The ones that attended them were as cloistered as they were, but the ones from the kitchen were another breed entirely. "I'm sure father will pick a good man."

Deseem frowned at the china of his soup bowl. "This is not my food."

His sister stopped speaking. Her servants glanced to him. His servants glanced to each other but no one answered.

"This is not my food." The pattern on the china never changed. His sister's was stylized with yellow and pink lines in swirling round ovals. She was to be a bride and wife and the colors and pattern of all she touched and used reflected that fact since the day she was born. He was to be a priest and his items of personal use had also been marked, with blue and green patterns of straight lines and triangles, sharp points and angles. The pattern on the bowl in front of him had the straight lines, triangles, and sharp angles of the priesthood but it also had the entwined curving patterns of a bride, similar to his sisters but not as obvious.

"Your Majesty..." The servant started.

"This is not my food." He leaned back. "Take it away and bring it proper this time and see to it fresh is also brought for my sister. I will not have her eating stale food because of your failure."

"Your Majesty..."

"Brother." A deep voice echoed from behind Deseem and he could tell by how wide his sister's dark eyes grew that the owner of the voice was in the room with them.

She instantly bowed, deeply and the servants as well. Deseem was a fraction slower, he was startled by his older brother's arrival and had to actually turn to confirm it was him before he bowed as well.

"I had hoped to arrive before dinner but it wasn't to be."

At his words, the servants eased and his siblings rose from their deep, respectful bows. Deseem had always admired his elder brothers ; tall, strong, dressed in the form fitting clothes of the leaders and warriors they were. Even here, in the heart of the palace his brother was armed, a sword with an ornate gold hilt hung from his finely crafted belt. His hair was braided into a thousand braids; dozens of silver hoops pierced his ears, each one earned in battle. Irendorialah was second son and as such was everything a Bastion male should be and everything Deseem admired.

"Brother."

"Deseem, a word with you alone."

It wasn't a request and Deseem rose as carefully to his feet as he could. His brother's presence was strong enough that his servants didn't instantly rush forward to fuss over his clothing. That made him nervous. His brother's visits were few and far between but never once had he requested to speak to either of his younger siblings alone.

"As you wish." He nodded his head and when his brother turned to go to a side room, he followed without question.

The side room was a large rectangle with an open floor and chairs along the wall. When their mother lived, it would have been a place where women gathered to sew and talk, shut behind

closed doors with only cloistered servants to attend them. It should have been a room filled with life but had been sitting empty for all of Deseem's memory.

"Leave us." Irend ordered but Deseem's servants paused.

"Your Majesty..."

"I know the laws. Leave us. He's my brother and will not be touched."

That made Deseem frown. Yes, he was to remain untouched by women, as was the law but never had the ban been enforced to men. He waited until they were alone.

"Irend, what's going on?"

"Sit down, little brother."

"I'm fine."

Irend shook his head and the tiny braids shook freely around him. "Sit down, little brother." He moved and pulled one of the chairs from the wall and placed it near his brother before moving to fetch one for himself. This one he placed several feet away before he sat in it. Breaking such news was never easy and it was made more difficult with his brother's golden amber eyes on him. The young man couldn't have gotten their black brown eyes; instead he'd gotten a variation of their mother's light brown amber. It made Irend wonder if that was maybe why their father was so hard on his youngest child and so willing to place him in such a position.

"Please, Irend, tell me what is going on? I'm surprised, but pleased, to see you. Last we had heard you were on the border near Dunsach. How goes the war?"

He sighed and eased back in his chair a little, having to adjust his sword to do it. "The war is long and bloody and never ending and we are not going to win." They were words he'd only confess to his brother and only when he knew no one could overhear. "I had a message from Uncle to deliver to our Lord Father and it was at his request that I speak to you."

"Uncle's?"

"Father's." The boy he'd known when he'd ridden to war a year ago was not the boy sitting across from him. Deseem had always been a bright and thoughtful child but now his intellect was almost a fire behind his amber eyes. A carefully banked one but a fire nonetheless. It wasn't the first time he tried to picture his brother's mind turned toward war and the subtleties of commanding an army. If he hadn't been the third born son he could have made an amazing warrior and if their father had left things as they were, his brother would surely have become the most powerful priest of their age.

"Things are difficult right now and complicated. You're young yet, I don't expect you to understand the importance of this."

Deseem folded his hands in his lap and pushed the sick fear down. He was a child of the Guiding Star of Bastion and feared nothing, or at least that's what he'd been told. Irend had been the one to tell him while he was still small that it didn't mean not feeling fear but not expressing it.

"You know our Lord and Father has invoked many old laws, old ways, saying it is because we have lost our truth that we have grown weak."

"Yes, I study the old laws daily."

He nodded and wasn't surprised. "Many of these he revived long before either of us were born

but he continues to do so and has done so again recently. A law that concerns you and fell into effect again this afternoon.”

“What law brother?”

“Father needs to secure allies, his place is not as stable as it should be with the war and bloodshed. Many of his allies have far more sons than daughters; Henridyiah has nine children, all around your age. His two oldest sons are his heirs, his daughter will become my wife next year, and his third son will enter the priesthood as you’ve been trained to be but the other sons are too valuable to offer to God. A son takes a bride and brings a stranger into his house; it’s a sign of trust. When securing a less than stable relationship you give over your daughter to another man’s house, but too many of our most trusted families have too few daughters and men like Father and Uncle had only one wife and refuse to wed again yet.”

The sharp stab of pain at the thought of his sister wedding and leaving him was nothing compared to the strike of panic when understanding dawned. “Bentan Bride.”

“Father has decreed the old law valid. All third or later sons are now eligible for both the priesthood and to become a Bentan bride. This will be the last you and I can ever be alone together until you are wed or have taken your vows. As Bentan, you may not be touched by any man except a eunuch, just as your sister may not; but as priest you may not be touched by any woman either. You must now learn both roles and be ready to fill either place.”

“No, no I won’t!”

“Brother...”

“No!” He stood up and felt his fear and anger boiling. The chair skidded across the floor behind him. “I won’t! I am no woman nor will I be treated as such!”

“Brother...Deseem...” He frowned but held his own chair. “It pains me as well, but it is the law and tradition of the land.”

“I won’t do it!”

“Enough!” Irend roared and rose to his feet. His brother had grown but he was still a boy and not very tall. “You are a prince of the royal line, a child of the Guiding Star of Bastion! Act like it! It is not our right or position to question the place that God has decreed for us, it is merely our place to serve!”

The anger stopped Deseem’s protest even though he knew his brother would never raise a hand to him. That was doubly true now that he was untouchable, the only one to be allowed to beat him was their father but that didn’t mean Irend couldn’t smack him with a cane or break a vase over his head. Or worse, his brother could call fire and burn him.

“You will become a priest or you will become a bride. Hold to your dignity no matter which direction God wills. You are young, too young for either choice still. Father still decrees that if you are to be married, it will be delayed until your seventeenth year so you’ve nearly three years before you must face either fate. Many things can occur in three years, brother. Until then learn your new lessons and hold firm to your purity and do not dishonor our house.”

He wanted to hit something or scream ; instead he nodded meekly. “Yes, brother.”

“Good. Would you care to explain to our sister or shall I? I would like the chance to see her before having to leave.”

“I’m not feeling well, I’d like to retire if I may?”

Irend nodded and saw the anger and fear in the amber eyes. "Of course. May the peace of God fill you brother."

"And also you." Deseem answered automatically but barely heard the words. He moved quickly to leave, opening the door for himself since all of the servants had been dismissed. Out in the garden he caught his sister's worried glance but was in no mood to try to explain to her or listen to her false comfort that marriage wasn't a horrible option.

He didn't pause but kept moving, his servants following now and scrambling to catch up. This time ignoring them was an effort but he hurried away to his own set of rooms and didn't stop until the door slammed closed behind him.

"Bring my dinner to me here, draw a bath, and take my hair down, I am not going out again this evening." He ordered and sat down on the dressing bench. The pair rushed to obey, one bald man moved to the bath and he soon heard the hiss of water running while the other began the task of freeing his hair from its hundreds of braids. He hated the braids, the time it took to create them and remove them. He had been looking forward to having his head shaved when he took his vows. Either way in a few years time he'd never have to worry about them again. A priest was shaved bald when they took their final vows, severing ties to their family in the process and a bride wore her hair in two braids only. It wasn't until he was soaking up to his chin in hot, scented water and nibbling at his dinner that the urge to lop his hair off finally passed but the cold fear of his new future didn't melt with the water's warmth.

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Story Home

Home

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Chapter Two

Marla turned the fabric over in her hands and smiled brightly. "It's unfair brother." She handed the cloth to one of her servants, the woman handed it to one of Deseem's servants and that man handed it back to her brother. "Six months of practice and your needlework is nearly as good as mine."

The compliment offered him no sense of accomplishment. "It means nothing to me."

"Really, Deseem, will being a bride be such a horrible fate? You'll be second wife and as Bentan you'll be spared the marriage bed since no Bentan in the history of the world has produced a child." Her voice faded away and she picked at the meat of a cracked nut.

He wasn't as convinced of that as his sister was. He knew there were things men could do together, just not what they were. Once he'd nearly caught two priests in the temple but a

passerby had prevented him from spying on their actions but their words made it clear something was possible. From the texts he'd read of the old laws on Bentan, the function of a Bentan was to provide comfort while the first wife was with child or tending a young child.

It wasn't even the idea of intimate relations with a man that upset him. He'd known almost from before his body had begun to mature into that of a man's that his only outlet for some of the urges he'd been trying to control would be with other men. His tutors had hinted, but not even begun to explain, only left small clues that things were to be expected; that there were comforts to be found in the company of men. Relations with another priest or with a husband would be much the same as he thought it.

No, it was the rest that came with being Bentan that disturbed him. He would no longer be a son of the Guiding Star but a daughter. No one would refer to him as he but she. He would be expected to dress, act and behave as a woman and wife would. Never again would he be acknowledged as a male and even his own brothers would call him sister. He would never be a priest, never again be a boy and he was mourning that potential loss as surely as if he'd already been promised.

"Please, don't look so sad. You make my heart ache for you brother, knowing I will be leaving you when you're still so upset."

"Leaving me?" He glanced up over the table but she could only mean one thing.

"Father sent me word, this time next month I shall be a married woman."

"Marla..."

"I've heard little of him, not even his name, just that he is a stern but fair man and Father has selected him." She forced a smile but tears welled up in her eyes. "So, please, brother, let's not be sad with what time we have. Tell me a story, tell me of some long ago hero and his great love?"

"Very well." Women weren't allowed to read and even a daughter of the royal line hadn't been taught. If he became a bride, he'd no longer be able to pour over old books and learn new stories of old romances with which to make his sister smile. Romance and love was one ancient law and tradition that hadn't survived to their age.

"How long can she scream?" Deseem asked and pulled his knees closer to his chest. There seemed to be no place in the cloistered wing of the palace free from the horrid sound of his sister's tortured screams so he'd retreated to the main garden but that was no better. He sat there being silently watched by his servants and none were willing to offer comfort or even a few words in answer to his question.

Marla's husband had learned she had magic. A woman was not allowed such power and a wife was doubly forbidden under the laws and traditions of their people. If her husband had not protested, she may have slipped by unnoticed but he had and threatened the marriage because of how she was born.

If the marriage was broken, she'd be a disgrace and worse. Neither of them were sure of what the worse was but Deseem had found enough hints in his books to know it was not good. Marla had wept for the entire day when word was sent to them and he'd had to sit on his side of the garden unable to even wipe a single one of her tears away.

Until one of his tutors, an older priest had arrived with several guards and a dozen more priests Deseem didn't know and informed her that there was hope. There was a way to remove her

magic and whether she wished it or not, their father had so ordered it be done. The guards hadn't been necessary, she'd followed them willingly away to a prepared room somewhere in their wing.

The screaming had started within the hour and had continued for the better part of the day. It was a maddening sound and that first day he'd wanted to break from his series of rooms, into hers and find her and make them stop. It wouldn't be allowed, he knew he couldn't leave his section of the palace and that there were armed, strong eunuchs at the doors to keep him in place but with each scream he felt his betrayal of his sister deepen.

The second day her screams were hoarse and broken but they cut him deeper. He felt pushed to the boundaries of his own sanity and for the first time in his life, he felt trapped in his secure cloister. Since he was a small child, he'd spent part of every day talking with his only sister, sharing a meal with her and sharing their days. She was his only real companion and friend and he loved her dearly but there he sat, curled up like an infant, hiding in the gardens praying for her screams to stop but not doing a thing to help her.

As the third day disappeared, her voice did as well but Deseem knew from what little he'd been able to find on the subject that the process took three days. Three days of scrubbing the mind clean of any access to the magic in the world around them. Three days of burning out the inborn talent and just because she'd fallen silent didn't mean her suffering was over. He didn't sleep that night, instead he sat awake and watched the way the chilled night air made the leaves in his small private garden tremble.

He went to their garden every night for dinner and for a week found her side of the table empty with no place set. When he questioned his servants, they refused to answer him. When he asked his tutors, his arms were welted from their canes from wrist to elbows. It wasn't until the day of her wedding when he happened into the garden near noon that he finally saw her again.

Nothing outward had changed, except that her face didn't light up with a smile when her eyes drifted over to him. For a moment he feared she didn't know him but he saw tears well up in her dark eyes and he knew. Whatever had been done to her, she was still there, inside her own head, or as much of her as they'd left. She was dressed in the bridal finery; all six layers of it and the final touches were being made to her hair. One servant girl's job was to dab away the drool that occasionally leaked from one corner of her slack mouth.

Deseem made it back to his rooms before becoming ill. He didn't leave his bedroom for the rest of the day. If it had been in him, he would have curled up on his bed and wept but it seemed pointless. There was no one to notice or care, he doubted even God would hear.

Deseem found he didn't like traveling. As much as his mind had wandered out from within the walls of his rooms of the palace, he was secure there. The world seemed too large, too vast and unsafe and open and he found himself almost cowering in the coach he'd been bundled into. The servants that rode with him sat on the opposite bench and ignored him as they always did. He pulled the blinds on the small windows to dim the sunlight and pretend he was safely back in his rooms and not wandering across the world.

The isolation of the last year and few months since his sister had wed had made him quiet, which he was told was a good thing in both a priest and a wife but it had also made him unusually shy around strangers. Never once in his life had he been beyond his rooms and seen so many people, so many faces and so much of the land. It was overwhelming and he found himself withdrawing further into his own thoughts than was normal.

The only advantage to the forced travel was that his father was taking them closer to the border and that meant a chance to see his brothers. The eldest, Frendirialah, was a virtual stranger to Deseem. He saw his brother maybe once every few years but had only heard his voice twice

during his lifetime. It was Irend that he missed and hoped to see, Irend that would share with him word of their sister.

The trip had been long and boring. They stayed in tents when between noble's homes or when his father wished to travel faster. When visiting other people's holdings, Deseem was secured in a small series of rooms, carefully guarded and required to eat alone. Or he assumed he was alone, there was always one or two walls that were ornate carved wood that he couldn't swear didn't have people behind watching him. Once, when he was introduced to the Count in question, he was also introduced to his wives. All three of them and the third was Bentan. All three were dressed alike, fabric drawn across the lower portions of their face as any modest wife would wear but there was no doubt that the third wife was a young man and not a young woman. His eyes had been empty but for the pity they silently offered.

Deseem had dropped his eyes with the modesty of a wife and woman. He'd never dropped his eyes before as son and priest. He wasn't even a wife yet but facing what he would one day become was like cold water shocked down his spine. All the long months of training for his new future snapped in and he stood there, eyes down, praying he'd not become ill.

Most of all, he hated when they camped in the tents at night. He had to sit in the coach, alone, with his servants guarding the doors, while his tent was raised. It took over an hour, on a good day, because it wasn't just the tent but all the rugs and furnishings, all the belongings a prince was supposed to have at his disposal. The coach was stuffy when they simply sat in the sun and weren't moving and he tried to ignore the growing heat. So far north the climate was a little cooler, the flat planes and craggy rock faces around the palace had given away to scrub trees and small streams, wild grasses and soil more red than yellow.

The door to the coach finally opened and the cooler air that rushed in made Deseem sigh as it soothed over his skin. He happily scrambled from the coach, glancing around what appeared to be nothing but empty wilderness. "Where are we?"

"Several miles south of Extram, Your Majesty."

He nodded, they were closer to the border than they'd been yet but he saw no signs of the war. The road they had been traveling on was wide and he'd learned that many of the smaller country roads had been expanded for the war effort. Down the way that he imagined lead to the border, a plume of dust rose and obscured whatever was approaching.

"And that?"

" Prince Irendorialah approaches."

For the first time since making the trip, a spark of excitement darted along Deseem's nerves. "I'll wait here until he arrives. I wish to see he is well."

The servant bowed and stepped aside, not too far but back the proper respectful distance. It left Deseem standing alone in the meager shade of the coach watching the dust approach their camp. He hadn't seen his brother since the day he was told of being Bentan though he had been informed of his brother's marriage.

Even with the span of so much time, Deseem would have known his brother anywhere. War and combat had hardened the man, shaved off any last bits of boyhood from his frame. He rode his horse with a straight back, tall and proud. His black hair braided and twisted together back from his face. There wasn't an inch of his brother that didn't scream warrior and prince and Deseem admired him and longed to be him.

Eyes as black as night slipped over the camp and settled for a moment on Deseem hovering by his coach, taking in the changes that time had brought to his brother. Eyes so cold that they

made him shiver in the afternoon's warmth until a soft smile touched Irend's mouth and softened the hardness of his eyes. Deseem smiled back, hopeful, shyly, desperate for contact and word and hating himself for how happy the very sight of his sibling made him.

Until Deseem saw two ropes extending back behind his brother's horse and the people attached to each line. The smile fell away from his face and he wasn't sure to be fascinated or frightened, he'd never seen a Watcher of Corena before but they could be nothing but that.

His brother had secured them both with a rope and a rod, wrists tied away toward the ends of the sticks that were tied to their shoulders. It made walking an awkward task for the pair of captives and the tugs from the tether ropes didn't improve their balance. From the rips and dirt on their black uniforms they had fallen, repeatedly and most likely been dragged a bit before finding their feet.

The woman fascinated him. He knew, logically, that women were allowed to behave as men in Corena but he had never seen a woman in pants before. The black fabric was thick with black thread embroidery and hung loose over boots. She wore boots like a warrior and he guessed if she was a Watcher, she was a warrior but the idea seemed strange and wrong. Her top was black, loose and full with drooping sleeves that billowed and floated with her movements. It tucked into the waist of her pants, pulled partially out from having been captured and bound but at one point had been quite tidy and it sat under a tightly laced bodice that accented the curve of her waist and partially flattened her breasts.

Her hair was short, barely curling around her shoulders and light brown. Her skin was pale, sun burned across her nose and cheeks but pale and with lines cut in around her eyes and mouth. He didn't consider himself a very good judge of foreign beauty but he couldn't call her beautiful. If she'd been a man, she'd have been handsome but handsome didn't seem proper to call a woman.

As they were pulled closer, he couldn't make out the color of her eyes. He was caught by the paleness of her skin and the utter lack of color in her clothing. The only spot of brightness was a belt around her waist. It was two fingers wide and elaborately beaded with tiny beads that formed blocky patterns of colors and shapes.

Anything else he might have noticed about her disappeared when his eyes fell on the man bound beside her. He was tall, the top of the woman's head barely came to the bottom of his shoulders, and lanky. There didn't seem much strength in his lean body but he was holding pace and not stumbling over much. The clothing he wore was black as well but of a different cut and style. There was no embroidery on his clothing and the cut was tighter, leaner and had more of a military look and feel. His pants fell straight and tucked into boots that rose to cover his knees. His shirt was more form fitting and unadorned and he wore a tightly cut waistcoat over it. All it did was make the man look leaner and taller and there was no bright splash of color from a beaded belt on his waist.

Instead, resting in the hollow of his throat was a thick silver chain necklace and a pendant in the shape of a mask. It was the traditional mark of a Watcher, a symbol even Deseem had heard of. It was said the only way to remove it was to lop the wearer's head off and even then the metal often refused to be parted from the flesh of the neck. That would have been enough to fascinate Deseem but the man himself was more interesting than merely old legends.

He was pale as well but lightly tanned from the sun instead of burnt. The skin that his torn and displaced clothing allowed to be seen was frightfully pale where the sun didn't touch it.

Even bound and captive, he moved with pride; stiff, arrogant and unbroken by his capture. His eyes, the color of the darkest sapphires Deseem had ever seen, were cold and hateful and made his brother's seem welcoming by comparison. They flashed hate and rage and left little doubt that if freed he was a man of horrible talents.

Eyes, skin, clothing, and rank aside, Deseem found himself staring because of the man's hair. It was short, trimmed and tended but it was white. Not silver or gray but white like powder. The very tips had a hint of brown as if dye had washed away but left the ends stained but the rest was white like bleached cloth.

He'd never heard of any such thing and wondered if it was common for the people of Corena to have white hair. He knew from reading that shades of red were common and seemed as fanciful as white or the reports of the Fisher Folks' yellow. Maybe it was common and he'd just never heard, but then he saw the filigree bracelet they both wore and he understood.

"Magic users." He heard himself whispering. Which was silly because all Watchers had magic, it was required to be a Watcher instead of a Guard. It made the dreadful rage in the deep blue eyes more unnerving because only a thin be-spelled bracelet of metal was keeping the man from unleashing God only knew what upon them all.

It left him wondering what could have possessed his brother to bring such dangerous prisoners to their camp and he found himself carefully following the group his brother rode with and their captives. The group rode to within a dozen feet of where their father and king's tents were, a cluster of smaller tents around a large personal one and an area in front with a cloth stretched between four poles to provide shade. In that shade their father sat, reclined on a pile of cushions with a small table near at hand, stacked with cool drinks and favored foods. Advisors sat near by and the older men's conversation faded away at the approach of the riders.

Deseem watched as his brother gathered the ropes of the tethers together and roughly pulled his captives forward. Irend and his men bowed deeply, kicking the captives' knees to force them to drop as well.

"My King and Lord, I have brought you captives as you wished. This pair of Watchers was caught while meeting a spy east of Extram. Your brother sends them to you as a gift to show his joy in your visit."

The white haired man struggled to his feet, shouting angry words but he didn't stay there long. One of Irend's soldiers quickly clubbed the man on the back of his skull, red bloomed among the white and the man went down hard. Deseem watched as the woman leaned over and spoke to the younger man and nudged at him a little with her face. Anything else he would or could have seen was blocked by one of his father's servants stepping between Deseem's line of sight and the captives.

"Your tent awaits you, my Prince."

It was a clear dismissal and he'd known as soon as someone noticed him watching he'd be hurried away. He nodded and let his servants walk him to his own area, back where he was safe from accidentally touching an un-castrated male, back where he would be alone again. All he could do was hope his brother would make the time to see him because he didn't even have the right to request a visit.

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Chapter Three

Irend didn't arrive before dinner was brought in and Deseem tried to squash his disappointment. It would have been nice to share a meal with someone, something he hadn't really been able to do since his sister had wed. He missed having a conversation over a meal, it just seemed to make the food taste better.

Traveling and boredom mixed with the anxiety of being away from the rooms he was comfortable and used to left him tired and strained at night. He knew he was retiring early while they traveled but beyond his practice and lessons which were seldom during this trip, he had nothing to do to occupy his mind. Once dinner was cleared away the biggest thing for him to consider was to wait to see if his brother would arrive or simply prepare for sleep.

The choice was made for him. As the dinner dishes were removed and the small collapsible table with it, the servants bustled to bring in tall poles with a thin gauzy fabric stretched between them. The poles were secured and his tent suddenly was discreetly screened from entrance. It made his heart leap a little, it meant company and that could only mean his brother.

Deseem sat silent as his brother finally slipped into his tent. He wasn't supposed to speak first, that had been a difficult lesson to master, and he sat hoping his brother planned to stay.

"Leave us." Irend ordered of the servants and they bowed and filed out. They trusted to the fragile, easily damaged fabric to secure Deseem's untouched state. A normal level of touch and the threads would snap or tangle and contact would be shown. It was a risk only allowed for a close family member and even a brother was only trusted within reason.

"Brother." Irend greeted.

Deseem bowed deeply.

"None of that, our time is short." He moved and sat down as close to the fabric as he could. "How are you?"

The question made Deseem pause and think. No one had actually asked him that since his sister wed. "I'm well. I heard you married."

Irend nodded. "She is a good wife. I've barely seen her, so long do I linger here with the fighting."

He dared to glance up and was surprised by the growing bruise on his brother's face. "What's happened?"

"Nothing." He shook his head. "Our Lord Father, he is not pleased the woman captive is missing her mask pendent. I swore to him with sacred vows that she was not wearing one when we caught her but he didn't believe me. He accuses our Uncle of stealing his prize. The man is growing more and more irrational."

"I never hear word."

"The war goes against us yet he throws more lives to it as if he can wash defeat away with enough blood." Irend squared his shoulders and drew a long slow breath. "Enough of this, it would bore you to hear. You know the reason you've been removed from your cloister to travel

with our Lord Father?"

He'd be a fool not to. "He seeks a husband."

"Yes. After what happened with our sister, many who might consider Bentan have been slow to agree. He hopes that by showing your pretty amber eyes and your meek manner around he'll entice more suitors."

"What?" The compliment to his manners and eyes went unheard and Deseem blinked and tried to gather his thoughts. "What about our sister?"

"You have not been told?"

He shook his head. "I've heard not a word since she wed."

Irend sat back and the strength melted from his shoulders. "She had a child, a daughter. Deseem, two months ago they found her babe dead, smothered by her own hand and when they sought her out they found her hanging by her neck from the post of her bed, one of her scarves around her neck. I'm sorry, I thought you would have been told."

The news fell upon him like a horrible, crushing weight. He felt tears well up into his eyes in response to a pain so deep he couldn't really feel it and his breath hissed in short gasps from his lungs.

"Deseem... Brother... stop... compose yourself... stop it...we haven't enough time for you to mourn now. I will be gone soon enough and you'll be alone and can grieve her death in private."

A woman's scream broke across quiet camp and Deseem nearly jumped from his skin. It was a cruel sound and made worse with the memory of his sister's screams so fresh in his mind. "What's that?"

Irend frowned and ducked his head to hide the unpleasant look in his eyes. "Father wished to question the captives himself. He is angry with how the war goes. Try not to listen too closely and remember, they are enemies and would happily murder us without a second thought to it."

Deseem nodded because he knew better than to disagree with a man but he wanted to ask his brother if that made it any easier to sleep at night, believing that it was justified.

"You will not become a priest, littlest brother."

"I know."

"I'm sorry."

"It is the will of God."

"I can not stay, I can not protect you. I failed with our sister and I am just as powerless to shelter you."

"I know."

"But I want you to remember I am always thinking of you." He whistled softly and the tent flap opened. "This is one of my men. He's been be-spelled by a healer, while intact, he is magically as any eunuch. I've gained permission to give him to you, he will have restrictions. He is unable to be alone with you, unable to attend your bed or bath but he will prevent as much harm to you as he can. He has sworn loyalty first to me and second to you and my orders to him are to obey you." Irend glanced up to the hulking fellow, a battled hardened warrior now with his dark hair

shaved off and a filigree, bespelled band around his testicles. What the man was doing was a huge risk and an even larger sacrifice but it was necessary. "This will be the last time we speak brother."

"Surely you'll attend my wedding?"

Irend smiled softly. "If God wills it so. My oath is to Bastion first and I must see to the well being of the kingdom above all." He stood and the smile grew sad. "You would have grown into being a fine man and a powerful priest, brother, it makes my heart ache to know you shall never be either." He glanced into his man's dark eyes and saw the understanding there.

"Are you leaving?" He felt a desperate need to keep his brother with him, suddenly frightened he really never would see him again.

"I ride back to Uncle tonight. Know that I love you brother."

Before he could think of an answer, his brother was gone. He wanted to throw himself on his bed and weep for his sister, for his own solitude, for the loss of both his siblings. He wanted to throw something in impotent rage at knowing without a bit of doubt that he was to be Bentan and become a bride, that even if by some chance he was to see his brother again he would be sister to him. It all churned together in his stomach but nothing reached the surface and he sat there unmoving as his servants returned and removed the screening fabric and eyed their new arrival with suspicion.

He was still sitting there, hours later when the sounds of pain and tortured finally eased and his servants prompted him to sleep. There was nothing in him to protest and he let them unbraid his hair, wash his limbs and feet and dress him for sleep. Even as they extinguished the lamps he lay awake with his eyes open, feeling trapped and powerless, haunted by the memory and guilt of his sister's own screams.

The camp had grown quiet and dark and Deseem was still awake. Sleep refused to take him and he lay there with his eyes open in the dark. Before he was to be Bentan he would have prayed but now he didn't believe anyone would hear his prayers let alone consider answering them. Before, just the meditation of prayer would have soothed him but even that seemed false and distant.

There was too much to feel to really feel anything. Learning of Marla's suicide had struck him like a physical blow but now, when he was alone and able to grieve and mourn, no emotion was willing to surface. He just felt guilt, disgusting, weighty guilt and having stood by and let them torture her. The Marla he'd known would never have taken her own life before her mind had been burned and her body sold in marriage and he'd allowed that to happen to her.

It just reminded him of how powerless he was. He was going to be bartered off, not the priesthood for favor from God but to some noble for far more earthly favor. He'd have no more say over it than Marla would and in a years time his eyes would be as sad and knowing as the Bentan's he'd met. It made him want to scream with rage and shatter every breakable in his tent, to claw at his face and rip out his hair but instead he just lay there, unmoving, struggling to hold panic at bay. Worse, if his father was going to question the prisoners, he wouldn't even have the distraction of travel to break up his thoughts, he'd be stuck in his tent for days until the captives broke or died, listening to them scream and feeling like he should be screaming with them.

In the darkness he suddenly hated his father. Not just the blind, cold indifference or the trained empty loyalty or even the shivering fear he often felt when he saw his father. He felt none of that now, just cold, deep, freezing hatred. It was his father's fault that Marla had been cleansed in the old ways and had her mind shredded. It was his father that had picked her husband, a man that surely had not been kind to her to make her take her own life to escape. It was his father that drove his brother to fight in an endless war. Worse, it was his father that would make him into

being Bentan, forced to give up his very gender and live the rest of his life as a woman. The source of all his misery was his father and he felt as helpless against the man as a fly did against a giant.

For a wild moment he considered following his sister's example. It seemed the only action left to him, the only one that was still his choice. God would surely forgive him. Suicide wasn't totally taboo, there were times and situations when it was expected. To restore honor for one, or when cornered with no other options, or to repent for crushing failure or shame, all were valid and proper reasons to consider suicide. He knew all of this just as he knew that cowards went to the deepest of hells. The trouble was, he wasn't sure if God would judge him as being in a situation with no honorable options or as merely the coward he felt himself to be.

Then an even wilder idea sunk in. One that terrified him more than facing damnation for disgrace and cowardice, an idea so strange that he half wondered if in his suppressed grief he might have gone mad. He couldn't strike at his father, that was unthinkable. Nor could he run away because really where would he go? No one would take him in and he couldn't survive on his own, he knew that much, knew he'd been so completely and fully sheltered that the real world would eat him alive. He couldn't go back and save his sister, or at the least make the effort and there was no power in his hands to prevent his own future.

That didn't mean he couldn't place a thorn in the lion's paw. Small, minor but still a thorn and even if he pulled it off and was the only one to know he had arranged that small pain it would be something to cherish. His father had directly requested Corena Watchers be captured and brought to him. He'd struck Irend because the woman was missing her pendent. They meant something to his father, something small maybe and on the same level of pleasure he might receive from a fine sweet dessert but it would be some tiny amount of pleasure denied. If he was very lucky, his father would know it was him and he'd kill him in his rage.

The idea was thrilling and he found himself slipping from his bed. His first thought was to call a servant to dress him but he grinned at his own habits and foolishness before he could call out. He may not have much practice but he knew how to tend to himself and he slipped into his robe with far more speed than he ever could manage with servants fussing at him.

He moved quickly and as skillfully as a cat in the darkness. The long travels had earned him that much, he had spent enough hours pacing his fabric prison to know every sharp edge of every chest and ever loose corner on every rug on the ground. He found the scarf he sought by feel, not caring which it was so long as it was the long wrap style and he quickly secured it around his hair and over part of his face. If he was spotted, his excuse of clearing his head in the night air wouldn't work if he was modestly covered. Modesty didn't make him slip a dagger into his sleeve, that was just practicality.

Just because he'd never disobeyed didn't mean he hadn't thought about it. Some days, plotting ways to escape his escorting servants and even his cloistered set of rooms were all he had to hold his mind together. The tent had been no different. Almost from the first night he'd considered different ways to slip away unnoticed. Not that he'd ever had the courage to disobey before but just in case he ever wanted to.

He'd never, not once in his wildest of day dreams, believed he'd want to risk so much. It wasn't a choice of want, he knew it, he had to try this or he really would slip over that final edge into madness. There was nothing left for him he wasn't afraid to risk. What more could be done to him? Taking his life was no threat and that was the worst situation his mind could create.

There was a wider gap, toward the back of the tent behind a chest, where the space between stakes was a little too wide. It was a tight fit but he already knew he could lift it up from the ground high enough to slip under it. The temptation to slip outside had been sharp the day he'd found the gap but instead he'd sat on the ground and peered out, watching the camp life he wasn't allowed to take part in.

He dropped to the ground and peered out into the darkness. He saw torches off toward the edges and the moon was dark but he saw no movement. There would be a guard on the edges of their encampment but not so close to his own tent, he knew that, they set the guard the same each time. He dropped to his stomach and nearly froze, nearly gave up and ran back to his bed and forgot the craziness of his idea.

It was only remembering the woman's screams and the shouts of the man and how it had mingled in his mind with the sounds his sister had made that kept his nerve steady. This was his chance to do something and likely the only one he'd ever be given. The ground was hard below him but he slipped out into the open with ease.

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Chapter Four

Only it struck a sense of panic in him. He'd never been in the open, unescorted, before in his life. The stars overhead seemed too high, the world around him too large. It felt suddenly crushing and he wanted the security of a servant following at his heels to make it seem safe and okay. He had to crouch down by the tent and catch his breath, steady his heartbeat and nerves before he again knew he simply had to continue.

His knees felt like water and he thought he might faint or become ill but he stood up and stayed standing. He knew where his father's tents were and he had a pretty good idea which tent he'd place his captives in. Deseem had studied the camp and it's layout from sheer boredom without ever really expecting to put that knowledge to use.

The tent his father was sleeping in was off to the side a little and had several guards around it and it's own little ring of torches. He moved, trying to look confident and not like he was skulking about like a thief, and circled around until he saw a single guard on another tent, this one still had a lamp burning inside. He closed his eyes, drew a steadying breath and carefully made his way around the darkened tents to the back of the one he believed the prisoners were held in.

It was almost the same size as his own and when he counted off the stakes, sure enough, he found the same slightly wider gap between two. Quickly he crouched down and pried up the fabric to peer through the smallest of cracks inside. He saw no movement, no feet, nothing to hint that anyone was standing guard inside. He told himself it was too late to turn back and hurriedly shimmied inside.

The site nearly made him ill. Unlike his older brother who was trained from birth to be a warrior, Deseem had been utterly sheltered from violence. He'd been completely sheltered from just about everything with the closest he came to blood and battles being an old book and a chance paper cut. It was worse when it sunk in that the cruelty before him had been wrought by his own

father.

Both the man and the woman were naked, a sight that otherwise would have made him blush in deep modesty. He'd never seen a real woman unclothed but he was aware of biological anatomy and really the only male body he'd seen naked had been his own. He found himself trying to glance at their feet or backs, not their rounded bottoms and he didn't know what he'd stare at when he approached them from the front.

What kept him from blushing were the wounds. They were bound at the wrist with rope and secured to a cross bar set between two poles. The length was adjusted so both were barely able to balance some of their weight on their toes, leaving the rest to pull painfully at their shoulder joints. The man had been caned, a rod that Deseem knew well as it was used on his arms when he wasn't fast enough with an answer. Only his tutors used a lighter rod and a lighter touch and raised welts without breaking the skin. The beating the white haired man had taken wasn't as merciful, his back from shoulders to thighs were bloody lines, around each broken line was a wider bruise from the raw impact of the cane. Blood had slipped down his back to line his ankles and dribble from his heels in fat drops. Deseem was certain there were other wounds, areas that looked blistered from fire and both the man and woman had been beaten but for the most part the man looked in better shape than the woman.

His father would have focused on her. A mere female daring to raise a hand against his army? . It would have enraged him. Deseem wasn't even sure if there was a hands width of undamaged skin on her. She hung from her wrists, unconscious and not even making any effort to support herself. No concern had been given to either by a healer and not even a bucket of water had been used to wash away the blood.

"God's mercy." He whispered, shivering by the edge of the tent. There was no way he could leave now, knowing what was being done, having to listen to them and remain inactive. No one, enemy or not, should be treated so horribly. He whispered a prayer for forgiveness and stood up.

His words or his movement startled the white haired man awake and his head jerked upward. "Doreina?" He muttered and glanced around as much as he could, his face swollen from the beating he'd taken. He spoke more but the words weren't ones Deseem knew. As he stepped around the braced poles they were hanging from, the man's dark ink blue eyes swung around and glared hate at him.

It froze Deseem where he stood, chilled by the rage he saw. The man was a cornered animal, dangerous and desperate. He might not have to wait for his father to learn who had freed the captives to be killed, the white haired Watcher might do the deed for his father. Some madness spread across the young man's face, twisting it up into a grimaced mask of insane rage and his weakened body trembled with unexpressed emotion.

"I'm not going to hurt you." Deseem whispered and glanced to the tent's entrance. The guard was posted twelve steps from the entrance but that was close enough to over hear if he was paying attention. Even odds were that man was half asleep standing up and wouldn't become alert unless startled.

He slipped the dagger out of his sleeve. The sight of it made the white haired man draw a deep breath and square his shoulders, preparing himself as best he could for whatever was about to occur. "I'm sorry I can do so little." He whispered, trying to sound soothing and soft because the man obviously didn't understand him any better than he understood the Watcher.

With care he slipped over to where the rope was secured. The knot was tight and convoluted and he knew nothing about knots so instead he began to saw away at the rope struggling to make the fibers part as quickly as possible. The rope finally parted and the white haired man fell, hard to the ground. The impact pulled a groaned grunt of pain from him and he lay where he'd fallen, struggling to breath but Deseem didn't take the time to check on him. He moved quickly to cut

the rope to the woman and found practice with the first made the second go smoother. She fell without any effort to brace her landing and with no sound.

He was committed now. What he had already done was enough to have him put to death as a traitor. He moved to where the man was struggling to get to his knees, wanting to touch him and help him but suddenly terrified to. He may be a traitor but he was still pure, still untouched by anyone and his utter fear of breaking that made him move with care. He leaned forward with the knife and his open, empty hand and pulled back a little when the man glanced up at him with a snarl of hate.

"Here, please, we must hurry." He gestured to the man's bound and bloody wrists and it took a second but the man offered them. It wasn't as easy to cut the rope when he couldn't risk touching the man to steady him but he worked at it and got the ropes to part. There was no way he could risk accidentally touching a woman but he paused a heartbeat before turning the blade and offering the hilt to the Watcher. "Here. Free her."

The blue eyes stared at him as if Deseem was suddenly the one gone mad. It gave him pause before he reached a shaking hand out, the hilt hit his palm with enough force to fill the tent with a sharp slapping sound. Deseem braced himself for the blade to slip between his ribs and he could see the need to murder and avenge in the blue eyes but the man drew a shaky breath and struggled to the woman's side instead.

Deseem let out a breath he didn't know he'd been holding and moved back. Across the tent he found the dirty and torn black clothing the pair had been wearing, down to their boots but not the woman's belt, that was missing. He gathered the cloth up in his arms and moved to quickly drop them near where the man was soothing back the bloodied and damp tangled hair from the woman's face.

"I've no bandages, I'm sorry. " He whispered again and bent to try to help sort what was his clothing from hers. The man was ignoring him, instead he was trying to fit the tip of the dagger into the small locking latch of the be-spelled bracelet. It was too wide and there was no way to pick the latch open with it but Deseem stood and hurried across the room. If the tent was just like his, there would be metal pins holding the top canvas to the sides and one of them wouldn't be missed. He leaned up on his tiptoes and slipped one of the slender bits of metal free.

"Here." He motioned to the man's wrist and when the Watcher's hands reached for him he found himself jerking away, barely avoiding being touched. The man might not have understood but he went suddenly very still and offered the bracelet's latch to Deseem and his slender bit of metal.

Blue eyes glanced from him to the tent's entrance and back again but Deseem had never tried to pick a latch open before and while the metal fit, he didn't know what he was doing. "Oh please, please open, please." He whispered and the side of his hand brushed the gold. It sent chills across his hand followed by a sudden feverish rush that blurred his vision and nearly made him faint. He blinked hard to clear his eyes.

When he could see again, the white haired man was prying the bracelet open further and forcing his arm through the small gap. The latch was still closed but a section near it had crumbled, eroded away as if a thousand years old and shattered with the force placed on it. There was only one thing that could do that, magic, Stonecypthering, and Deseem could be the only source of it.

"I'm sorry, I can't stay, I can't do more." He whispered and stumbled away, back to the loosened section of tent he'd slipped in at. He paused to spare one last look watching as the man quickly was pulling on clothing, wincing as cloth rubbed into damaged flesh, before he scurried out into the night.

He was having trouble breathing and every insect sound seemed like the stomping footsteps of a guard. The night seemed suddenly too dark and not nearly dark enough to hide what he'd just

done. There were too many tents, too many open places, between the prisoner's tent and his own, it hadn't seemed nearly so far on the way over.

"Hold." A strong voice called out and Deseem froze, so frightened he nearly fell over. "Who goes?"

He turned to face the guard, on his rounds about to check inside the perimeter of the camp as he was supposed to do every hour, and the torchlight fell onto his face.

"My prince?" The man frowned and glanced around. "Where is your escort?"

"I...ah..." This was it, he had no lie to cover this.

"Here." A deep voice rumbled out and a bald man stepped from the shadows. "The prince wished for some air which is none of your concern."

"We're too close to the border, these hills aren't secure. My prince, you shouldn't be out so late."

"I'll return to my tent." He bowed a little and said meekly, his heart about beating out of his chest and suddenly grateful for the man Irend had given him. He only worried now about how long the man had been following him, lurking in the shadows. His hands were still shaking when they reached his tent and the new man kicked at the sleeping servant by the door.

"Fool, sleeping while his majesty needed you." The man snorted awake and wiped his mouth to check for drool, suddenly looking guilty and confused as to how anyone could have left the tent without waking him.

He hopped to his feet. "Does my Prince require anything?"

"Privacy." He slipped around the pair and they didn't follow. He'd need to ask how much the new man had seen, doubting Irend's idea of protecting him would extend to treason, but right now he needed to be alone.

He pulled the covering from his hair and fell to his knees. The daring of his actions had left him breathless, shocked and overwhelmed. Now he had to wait and see what came of it, if anything at all. There was one thing, he had magic, as his brothers had and his sister, small maybe, weak, but it had sparked in his fear and panic and crumbled a bit of that bracelet away. That meant if his husband to be agreed with his father about wives having power, he'd be taken away and cleansed the same way his sister had been. Outside his tent, the wind started to pick up and blow, an unseasonable storm blowing in very fast and hard from the sound and he curled up on his bed. Things had just gotten more complicated but for the first time in months he didn't feel like some small, helpless bug waiting to be stepped on.

The darkness swallowed him as the wind began to roar outside. He lay there, waiting for the alarm to be raised, for shouting and guards to begin the search for the missing captives. It wouldn't take long for his father to know someone helped the pair away and he'd bring in someone with Sight to look. They'd be at his tent shortly after and it would all be over from there.

Rain opened up and soon was dumping in great sheets. Voices began to drift about in the camp but none had the urgency of guards. It sounded more like servants bustling around, securing loose items from blowing away and checking tents for leaks. The entrance to his own tent opened and one of his servants bustled in, soaked to the skin and carefully began to check his tent for leaks. It didn't seem possible but the rain was coming down so hard, it was pooling in areas and soaking through. They'd all be wet and chilled soon if the rain kept up.

Light flashed, bright even inside his tent and cause his eyes to flicker with the spotted after image. A heartbeat later a tremendous cracking boom rocked the camp. It made Deseem jump,

frightened irrationally. Whatever had caused the sound had come and gone and not touched him but it still made his heart race and his stomach clench up. Bells rang now and voices shouted in the night.

His servants paused in their efforts to poke with a long pole the areas of his tent that were starting to drip, trying to force the pooling water away and prevent them all from being flooded. Deseem sat up, knowing the alarm was now sounded. Knowing it as only maybe an hour until they came for him and yet he felt no fear. In fact, knowing he was maybe an hour from being killed as a traitor, because he had little doubt that his father wouldn't kill him on the spot, made him feel quite happy.

The tent opened again and Deseem peered outside, the rain was pouring still but it wasn't the guard or his father but the man Irend had given him a few short hours earlier.

"What's happened?" He asked of the man more because if he didn't the servants would find it odd.

"Lightening has struck a tent, it and several others are burning."

The servants gasped but Deseem didn't blink. "Which tents?"

The man looked eyes with Deseem. "Ones near your father's encampment, my Prince. Do not worry, you are safe here but it seems the prisoners may have escaped in the confusion of the storm. All is well, stay a-bed, I will wake you if there is danger."

Deseem nodded and stayed on his bed. The new servant knew, he had to know and he'd kept that secret. It couldn't have been chance that caused lightning to strike that one tent, the one that needed to burn down in white-hot fire to ruin any chance of someone with Sight seeing who had helped the escape. The only question that remained was whether or not the new servant had somehow managed that or someone else.

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Chapter Five

In spite of the noise outside his fabric walls and the fussing of his own servants, having some of his fear and worry removed mingled with the sound of the rain and Deseem found he slipped to sleep in truth instead of simply laying there watching his servants fuss with the tent and rain and wind. He slept more soundly than he had in months, years maybe, deeply and peacefully and was startled awake violently from his cool, empty oblivion when the entrance to his tent was flung open.

"Leave us!" His father roared and the servants scrambled to obey, Irend's man left as well but

less like a scurrying rat and more like a haughty and too proud housecat.

Deseem sat up, his breath frozen in his chest. It had stopped raining and the sunlight outside was bright. Whatever fury had brought the storm down upon them had fled with the night but he caught a scent of smoke on the air, a scent from the night's fires held down by the rain. His father stood in fine military form, dressed strongly, richly, as if the gold and gemstones worked into his clothing were all the armor he needed. King Restonarinach was not a man to suffer fools or one to be denied. His black hair showed none of the white in his beard, from magic or dye no one was willing to say, but it was woven intricately into tiny braids and styled from there. Even wet and drying, it still appeared perfect.

His father's beard was normally curled into ringlets, a traditional sign of wisdom but the night's rain had undone the style and for the first time in his life Deseem saw his father with a flaw. The black lines around his father's eyes were washed away but oddly that only made his wide, obviously furious dark brown eyes seem larger. His father wasn't armed and there were no guards with him but Deseem knew his father didn't need blade or man to kill him.

"Get up you viper!" The man hissed as he stalked into the room. He flung his left hand out and something soft and roundish bounced across the tent floor to wobble to a stop near Deseem's bed.

Deseem's eyes went wide and he pulled his feet back up onto the bed. The wobbling thing was a head, a severed human head and he expected it to have white hair or be a woman's but it was neither. He didn't know the distorted face. "Father?"

The tall man rushed over and clamped wide, strong hands onto Deseem, one hand closing over the back of his head and the other roughly gripping across his mouth. "Say not a word!" He roared and pulled his son off the bed, forcing him down to within inches of the head. "That man was the best of my men with Sight. None of the others could see a thing, just the brightness of the lightening but he Saw more."

The hand over Deseem's mouth disappeared and he tried not to whimper, tried not to piss himself in terror, knowing his father hated cowardice above all things. He felt the hand that left his mouth rustle against his father's body a moment before it returned with a singed bit of rope. "He saw on this and saw only you!"

Deseem was picked up by the back of his head and thrown half way across the tent, the bit of rope followed and landed in his face.

"I asked if he was certain that my son, my cloistered, meek, Bentan son was the one to betray me. He said he could not swear to it! I hear reports of you wandering about in the dark, so what am I to think? Do I believe this man that I've trusted for twenty years to See and Speak the truth, or do I believe my infant son, a babe so fearful he was sick for days when he was told he'd have to travel would so defy me, would betray his people and King? Or do I believe that my idiot child merely was seeking fresh air and this trusted man is Seeing wrong?"

This was the father Deseem knew, full of rage and anger and as the taller man stalked forward Deseem cowered down. "I am no fool, child!" Large hands balled up into fists. "You get to live because I have no proof beyond one person's Sight but what he Saw was damning and I had to kill him. Do you see that? You who mean nothing to me, who I curse being born every day get to live and a man who was loyal and useful I had to kill! I know the truth, viper child, I know it and you know it and we shall never, never, speak of this again! You continue to breathe simply because I require a marriage to secure some of my nobles with weaker spines but I promise you I will never forgive this. Any mercy I may have offered in the selection of your husband is no more! I will see to it you are wed to a man you richly deserve."

That almost broke all of his control and Deseem trembled where he lay. "Father..."

The first blow knocked his head back into the ground. It followed so closely on this speaking that for a dazed moment he couldn't remember what he'd said.

"Never call me that again! You are your mother's child and a bitch whore just as she was! You are filth to me."

The words hurt more than the blows that landed. Deseem stayed limp, trying not to speak or breathe or move, trying not to weep or cry for mercy because he knew he'd receive none. The beating abated quickly, and Deseem knew it wasn't because his father and King's rage was soothed but because they'd be visiting another noble soon and a bruised and broken face would win him no suitors.

His father stood and towered over where he lay. There was no doubt of the hate in the dark eyes, the indifference Deseem had always seen there was gone now. His father reached behind him and the captive woman's beaded belt appeared in his hand a moment before he flung it at Deseem.

"From this moment on, so long as you are a member of my house, that belt will hang over the entrance of your rooms. May you remember every time your eyes fall upon it that I detest you, that I loathe you, that I curse God for your birth." The large hands had balled up into fists again but instead of falling more blows down upon the young man he turned and hurried from the tent.

He paused in the entrance before allowing the servants back in. "I have given the Prince the belt from the female captive, it shall always be displayed over the entrance of his rooms, always, as a sign of the triumph of our travels." The words spat out. "See to it or it will be your heads! The prince has fallen and will require a healer. He is to be presentable in two days time."

Deseem heard their bowing and agreeing but he just rolled over onto his side and spat out a mouthful of blood. He trembled, forcing back tears, forcing back fear. When he opened his eyes feet were rushing into the room and soon he'd be fussed at but for the moment, he was untouched and left alone in his misery. Across the tent floor he locked eyes with the severed head, its eyes dull and dry and unseeing and a small spatter of tears finally came to his. Not for his father's hate, or the fear of his promises, or the pain of his beating. A small shower of tears slipped from his eyes because it wasn't his head rolling loose on the floor.

A year changed Deseem. The isolation he had been used to grew painfully, brittle sharp knowing that his sister was really gone and his brother most likely would never see him again. His servants quickly picked up the mood that Deseem was far from favored even if they were smart enough not to gossip about the way the King would burst in on his cloistered son and rage at him, beating him, taking out his anger and frustration from other problems on him. They withdrew and unless required avoided all contact with him. They had even stopped fussing about his clothes and hair being perfect since for the better part of his days, he was alone with no one to see if he was imperfect.

His father had canceled his lessons for the priesthood, making his future clear and what further lessons he was required to learn to be a wife were minor and simply required practice. During the course of an average day, he saw no one but his servants. His father would arrive to yell at him, beat him, and leave. Once every couple of days a tutor came and checked on his progress, but otherwise he lived alone.

The one exception was the man Irend had given to him. While he wasn't talkative or even overtly friendly, the man was nearly always within sight. He slipped small bits of gossip and information to Deseem about his brother. That was how he learned the border war was called at an uneasy and unofficial truce and how he learned that his brother and uncle had been the cause

of the truce, they'd taken command of the army serving there and refused to fight further. Those whispered words of news told him that his uncle and brother were opposing his father, leading what in essence was a civil war. That explained why his father had increased his beatings and had every book and piece of paper removed from Deseem's rooms, removing the last small pleasure from his life.

A year cut him from any ties he might have held dear, made him wary of those he was still forced to endure. A year had turned him quiet, speaking softer and he was far more careful with the few words he was willing to say. A year grew him taller and filled out his shoulders, but the days between meals, another punishment his father often inflicted, had kept him lean and frequently feeling faint. A year had taught him to keep the beaded belt well cared for. The sight of even the thinnest layer of dust made the beatings his father reigned down on him worse, but even removing it from its place didn't earn him death, just a beating bad enough to make him wish he could die.

"I don't understand." Deseem heard himself saying a little louder than a whisper but none of his servants were willing to answer. "If my hair is washed now, it will be wet to sleep with." He was having difficulty understanding why his father had sent the order as well. Deseem was to have his hair washed in a garden that he never had free access to. It made no sense.

"Because your father wills it." Was all any of the servants would say and even Irend's man hovered back near the entrance to the garden, looking as stern as always and more like he was ready for a fight than any servant should.

The garden was sunny and he was lead to a cushion in the center of the sunlight. He was directed to kneel as always, and held still while the servants skillfully stripped him to the waist. He'd been bathed by servants his entire life. But this time, even half dressed, he felt exposed and naked. He sat still as they unbraided his hair, combing out the twists and smoothing it to fall in crimped dark waves down his back. As a priest he would have kept his hair to his shoulder blades when loosened, but he hadn't been allowed to cut it, brides needed longer hair than priests.

There was a pause before the servants had him lean back to pour pitchers of warmed water over his hair. It wasn't the first time he'd had his hair washed outside of his bath but it was the first time they'd required him to just arch his back and lean back, without using his hands for support or offering any sort of help. It made his back ache but each time he moved his hands to grant some support they carefully moved them back to his lap.

A muffled cry of pain and hushed noise of protest broke across the garden, startling the few little birds from the plant life up into the sky. It startled Deseem as well. He pulled away from the servant's hands with soap still in his hair. The cry echoed again, followed by low, grunted moans. He traced the sounds to the side where plants grew far less dense and behind them to a carved wood screen. Being in the sunlight made it impossible to see past the carved slits in the wood but it was obvious now that some room was behind it and he'd been watched. The sounds continued, the sounds of pain became muffled whimpers but the grunting was growing louder. Being noticed should have frightened whoever was there away, instead it had made them more bold.

He didn't know what the source was but Deseem felt himself blushing and trembling a little, knowing he'd made similar sounds of hushed held in pain while his father beat him. "What is that?" He glanced to his servants. "Who is there?" They refused to look at him.

"Please, my Prince, let us finish your hair." One finally said softly and gently, guiding him to lean back again.

He gave in simply because he knew only to obey. He couldn't leave with his hair still filled with soap. The grunts finished before his hair was fully rinsed, but the hushed sobbing moans of pain lingered, and Deseem was quite pleased when he was finally allowed to return to his room, his

robe fully back over his shoulders but his hair still wet and loose on his back.

When his dinner was brought to him he asked after the sounds again and was again told not to think about it. When they combed his hair out and worked it into braids he tried a third time and this time they simply ignored the question. The unknown fear made his stomach feel tight, and while he let them put him to bed, he lay awake and unable to sleep.

He lay so still that his servants believed he'd fallen asleep and moved to dim the lamps and straighten the room as they did every night once he was asleep. During the last year he'd taken to staying awake just to listen to their hushed conversations. They spoke of other servants and family members, joked and chuckled and it eased some of his loneliness to listen to their friendship.

Tonight the room was quiet, and it took Deseem's ears a moment to understand that only one of his servants was in the room. Irend's man would be outside but he never spent the night in his bedroom. He tried to figure out why only one of the pair of men would be in the room, didn't matter which two but it was always two at night. Before he could come up with a good answer he heard his door softly open and shut.

"How is he?" One man whispered low and soft to the other.

Deseem's ears twitched but he held very still and tried not to change his breathing.

"Healers say he'll live."

"That man is an animal."

The one that had returned snorted a little and Deseem heard them folding blankets. "Bisbis is used to men too, he's the biggest slut in the hall, I think he's had half the guard's things up him in the last year alone. Lord Aleserain really is an animal. I've never seen so much blood."

"Bisbis said he never took his eyes from our poor prince and the more worried the dear became the more violent his Lordship grew. It isn't right, that man will shred our prince the same as he did Bisbis."

The other one snorted and sighed. "Only Bisbis will never have to see his Lordship again, our poor prince will be in that animal's bed every night forever."

"Such a shame, innocent thing like him? He won't survive a month."

"Not sane he won't."

They made noises of agreement but Deseem felt his heart racing. He wasn't entirely sure what they were talking of but he knew it was connected to the marriage bed. He now knew he'd been placed on display for his future husband and the man had found him appropriate and hurt one of the eunuchs in his place. He knew enough, he knew the man was cruel and so he was going to be his master. If he wasn't so empty inside, Deseem would have wept in fear and frustration.

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Snowflakes and Embers

Chapter Six

Several days passed and Deseem waited for word of his wedding, of even being promised and nothing was sent to him. His nerves felt wound tight and he found himself jumping, startled at every little sound. The days were agony, he found he couldn't sleep at night. Meals arrived regularly, which was unusual but he found his stomach too knotted up in fear and anxiety to really enjoy the treat.

Until one morning when things weren't the same, he paused outside his bedroom door. "Where is Irend's man?"

His servants did what they always did, they exchanged a look before one of them answered. "Today was a required inspection from a Healer, my Prince. Since he is magically altered and not physically. He'll return tonight."

"Ah." He stepped into his garden for breakfast but found the table wasn't there and there was no meal. In its place was a large moveable screen of paper and he could see kneeling on the other side the outline of a man. His feet froze but he knew from the placement of a cushion on his side that he was required to go forward. He knelt, trying not to show how sick with fear he was and waited.

"Do you know who I am?" A male voice asked.

"No, my Lord." Deseem answered softly.

"In a few days I shall be your husband."

He was glad the solid paper screen kept the man from seeing the look of terror and disgust that came to his face. He had to swallow hard a couple of times to speak again. "Yes, my Lord."

"You are a meek thing aren't you? I believed your father was lying to me, a man in his position will do anything to command the power of my ten thousand loyal fighters. Do not think you have any value to me because of the accident of your birth."

"No, my Lord."

"I wed you because I see the way the wind blows. Your house is in shambles, your eldest brother is a fool, your father dances on madness, your second eldest brother and your uncle are traitors. Your father needs my strength to rally the nobles and by wedding you he gains power from me and I fall into the line of succession. but you have no value to either of us."

He waited but there was a long pause and he filled it with an answer. "Yes, my Lord."

"You're older than I would have liked for a Bentan but to legally take a boy to my bed? To call one wife?" He man's breath had grown a little sharp and Deseem heard want in it and it made him shiver. "It pleases me to know I shall be the first to touch you. I have been in a near frenzy to run my hands across your tight virgin body. You are prepared to submit to my will?"

He wasn't, he really wasn't. Deseem wanted to scream and throw things and refuse but instead he trembled and didn't move. "Yes, my Lord."

The man groaned and Deseem glanced to the paper screen to see the man shifting his position where he sat. "Meek, untouched and so pretty... you would make such perfect bait for a trap. Drive a man to distraction with lust and want, slip him a pretty bride capable of destroying him. I can not allow you to hold power, my pretty bride but then, I'm not wedding you for your mind."

Deseem glanced up and couldn't stop the small whimper of fear that slipped from his throat. He remembered the faces of the men, the priests, that had arrived to cleanse his sister's mind. His mind scrambled for an option and glanced around to find Irend's man, his brother had promised him some protection but the man wasn't in sight. Instead he saw all of the eunuchs that served him in the room, as if they would need to drag him to be cleansed.

"I like that sound, I hope to hear it often." His husband moaned and snapped his fingers. Deseem saw the form of another person approach the man and kneel down, saw what he thought was the new arrival's head bob down into the man's lap. "You be a good, proper bride and go become cleansed for our wedding." The man moaned. "In three days time it shall be you I fill over and over again, take and plunder in every way."

There were no options for him. His sister had been cleansed and screamed and no one had offered her mercy or help, now it was his turn. He reached for his power, because he had to have access to some magic to require cleansing, but found nothing to grip onto. He had no idea what to look for, what to feel for, or what to do. No amount of wishing to not wed or have his mind burned could change that.

His husband was moaning on the other side of the screen and the shadowed movement made Deseem blush. It was dirty and lewd and wrong and terrified him. There was no escaping his fate, he'd known it well before this moment. What he hadn't known was that some part of him would welcome the cleansing. He knew it would hurt but maybe if he was really lucky when they were done he wouldn't care what happened to him or what his husband was going to do to him.

"What has happened?" A voice roared and Deseem whimpered. He had been dragged back to his room hours later, unable to open his eyes without pain, unable to move his body was so weakened and exhausted. His voice had cracked and fled long before they'd finished but he'd stopped hearing his own cries well before that. Now he lay on his bed, curled up in a tight ball, wishing he had the strength to rise and find a way to kill himself and end the burning, maddening pain in his head. Movement, noise, light, speaking, breathing, thinking was agony.

"Shhh." One of the other servants hushed Irend's man. "The prince's cleansing started today while you were gone."

"You're weeping?"

"Look at him!" The hissed whisper made Deseem whimper again. "You're new here, you've no clue what a bright, wonderful boy our prince was! Now they steal his mind away, he's not to even be allowed the mind to read when they finish."

"Damn it, my prince will flay me for this. Do you really care this much for him?"

"Of course."

"Good, fetch me chalk and a knife."

"What?"

"Do you want your prince to suffer more?" He said at a nearly normal volume but stopped when

the thin body on the bed moaned and wrapped arms around his head. "Chalk and a knife, now, and one of you pack a bag for the prince."

"You're... you're taking him away?"

"The King will kill us."

"I'll knock you out, you can blame me, just hurry now."

There was a pause before Deseem heard shuffling feet and a weight settled on the edge of his bed. A large hand petted his head and Deseem tried to pull away from it. "Shhh, I'm sorry, I promised your brother I would remove you before harm came to you. Forgive me for failing you and for having to hurt you now to save you."

Pain spiked as Deseem was picked up into strong arms but the warmth of another body was comforting on a deep, primal level. He felt tears streak his face but couldn't stop them; he had nothing left with which to fight them. The strong arms set him down on the bare floor and the cool stone was a chilling contrast.

"Can you hear me, littlest prince?" Irend's man said softly.

He forced his eyes open.

"I'm taking you to your brother but it will hurt. What do you need to take with you? You won't be returning."

The words made little sense and he struggled to understand. It formed order slowly and he understood he was going away, that was it and that made him shiver in deeper fear. If they moved him and his father learned of it, learned he hadn't kept the belt over his door as ordered, the pain would be worse. He moaned but the words wouldn't come, he struggled and pushed at the floor and the hands trying to sooth him that made him want to scream.

"What is it, tell me?" Irend had been very clear, his youngest brother had little and to sever him from something he held dear should be avoided if possible. He'd expected that to be a dear servant but the prince had turned out to be coldly isolated.

"B...be...belt..." he stuttered out, shivering around the blinding pain forcing one word out caused.

"I don't understand."

Deseem would have screamed if he had a voice left to use. The hands left him alone to lay on the cool floor. He heard footsteps around him.

"He wants his belt to go with him."

"Not his belt, you dolt, her belt." Deseem heard a chair being moved and cracked his eyes open enough to see one of the older men pulling the beaded belt down from over his door. "This isn't enough but it's some clothing, his jewelry, he is still a child of the Guiding Star and will not leave his heritage here." The man hissed in a tight proud whisper, placing a stuffed sack near where Deseem was laying a moment before he pressed the beaded belt into the trembling hands. "Here my prince."

The beads pressed into his hands and while he knew it wasn't logical, he also knew leaving it and breaking his father's command simply wasn't allowed. He struggled with the idea that maybe they really were going to spirit him away and he would be safe but the idea seemed far too fanciful.

"Chalk and a blade." The other servant pattered into the room on shuffling feet.

"Good." Irend's man placed both near Deseem and then stood. The sounds of flesh hitting flesh and startled cries of pain made him open his eyes to see the servant knocking the other two out cold and dragging their bodies to the side. He quickly used a loose scarf to secure their hands and feet together before he hurried back.

"Soon, littlest prince." He knelt with the chalk in his hand and began to draw on the floor. The lines wavered when Deseem tried to focus on them but his eyes wouldn't focus properly. As the man moved he chanted, tying words to the lines he drew on the floor with the precise care. When he was finished he moved and scooped up Deseem and placed him in the empty center of the chalked lines, hurried to fetch the bag that had been quickly packed for him and only then joined him in the center of the complex lines.

"Soon...if this works, it hasn't been tried in hundreds of years but my prince says it should work." The man tried to smile to comfort the worried, pain filled amber eyes but his own worry made the smile uneasy. There wasn't much else to do, see to it the lines weren't broken and spill the blood.

The blade cut easily into his arm and his own blood dripped into the center of the lines, onto the stone floor but he kept working at his arm until he'd cut a line half a finger length long. Deseem watched and felt the memory of something he'd read about once tickle his thoughts but he couldn't recall just what. It didn't surprise him to see a small silver vial slip from the cut inside the man's arm.

"I'm sorry to cut you, littlest prince but your blood must join the spell or it won't carry you as well."

It didn't matter, what was a little more pain in the sea of pain he was already drowning in? The man quickly drew the blade across his own arm and held it steady as blood fell in fat drops to mingle with the man's own spilled blood.

"I'm told this isn't pleasant but it shouldn't kill us." The man drew a breath, held it and broke the seal on the vial he'd pulled from his arm. He almost didn't do it, if there was any way he could smuggle the young prince from the palace without being caught he would, any chance, any odds, he'd take them but the prince was so totally isolated, so completely cloistered his brother had been right. The only way out was to be Fetched and that was going to be a wholly unique experience. Just in case they'd figured wrong, he whispered a soft prayer, asked forgiveness for having failed and killed the young prince, then up turned the vial and let the Fetcher's blood mingle with their own.

For several heartbeats nothing happened and the pair huddled inside the chalk circle with only their breathing to break the silence. Some part of Deseem knew escape couldn't be so easy, simply couldn't arrive for him. Then he felt like he was being torn in two. His vision went black, flickered, and he saw his rooms, then worse it overlapped and he saw two places at once. It made him want to scream again, made him want to vomit but he was too weak for either. He felt like he was falling, then flying, then falling hard and fast again. His bones felt broken, his flesh shredded and torn, he swore his life was draining away and then he felt himself being put back into order.

His vision cleared before he could breathe again or hear and it wasn't his rooms he was seeing. It looked like a tent, a fine one surely, but a tent, and lamps burned brightly. He gasped but his lungs wouldn't work and as his hearing came back he heard shouting and someone near by gurgling and someone else vomiting. The robes of a priest brushed in and bald servants, eunuchs, held him steady as a Healer priest knelt near him.

Suddenly his body warmed under the man's magic and his lungs shuddered. He gasped a painfully large breath, choked on it, coughed, wheezed but was breathing. His body felt as battered and torn as his mind, as bruised and broken as it ever did after his father's rages. Tears

slipped from his eyes but into his field of vision his brother appeared.

"It's okay now littlest brother... shhh... it's okay... you're safe now. Rest."

It wasn't a suggestion when the Healer backed the command up. Deseem shuddered and had a single moment to wonder if it was all some mad hallucination before his thoughts puffed out and his body dropped him into much needed slumber.

Awareness became a fragmented thing. Deseem drifted up from blackness to hear a woman humming once; another time to hear strange male voices talking in the hushed whispers of servants, but little more than that sunk in. Sometimes his eyes fluttered open to see a tent, sometimes a wagon and with that came the rocking motion of movement. That was oddly comforting, unless he was completely insane and so far gone into a fantasy, that rocking movement meant he really was free. Always there was the pain but each moment of wakefulness found the pain a little more tolerable.

He drifted up to humming again, a soft song he was growing used to hearing and sighed. When he opened his eyes, they felt like they might want to stay open this time and he found himself in a tent again not some moving wagon. His body still hurt, aching and stiff but not feeling beaten and his mind burned but it was no longer a raging fire, more blistered feeling like a severe sunburn he'd gotten once as a small child.

Across the tent was a woman he didn't know, she was young, close to his age he guessed and dressed in heavily embroidered, draping fabric. Her hair was twisted into two braids that fell down her back and her hair was uncovered. She wasn't pretty or ugly, just ordinary with dark brown hair and warm brown eyes that seemed kind. When she glanced up from her sewing and saw him awake, she smiled brightly.

"Joined us, have you?"

"Who are you?"

"Venbarelenlo, your sister, wife to your brother, my husband. Please, call me Barelen. How are you feeling? Would you care for anything, there are servants here to attend you?"

His mouth tasted like some ancient sock and felt as dry. "Water?"

She bowed a little. "Very well, let the servants attend you." She stood and wrapped a red scarf about her hair. "I must fetch my husband."

He didn't know the servants and didn't like them but he was grateful for how they helped support his head and dribbled water into his mouth. Even with their care, he still choked on the small amount of liquid and weakly coughed. His skin felt dirty, his hair was braided into a simple single length and he was wearing nothing under the blankets he'd been tucked under.

Being awake seemed overrated, even if the water felt cool and good in his throat. He was thinking that drifting back to sleep was a good idea until the tent opened and his brother hurried in, his wife following a modest distance behind him.

"Littlest brother, you're awake."

"Irend..." Deseem sighed and hated how his brother came close but stopped before getting too close. "Where am I?"

"That doesn't matter, you seem well... we've feared the worst. Forgive me, the man that I sent with you was unable to retrieve you before Father hurt you."

"How is your man?"

"Recovering, he's returned to my service."

Which meant the Healer's spell that had castrated him had been lifted and the warrior had returned to being a warrior and not a servant and Deseem accepted that because he had no choice but to.

"The spell worked but was rough on you, him and the Fetcher it was rooted in, we nearly lost all three of you."

"Uncle?"

"Home, he's not traveling with us."

"What?"

"Brother." Irend looked uneasy. "How much do you love our kingdom?"

"I am a child of the Guiding Star."

That brought a soft smile onto his brother's face. "Yes you are. Rest, rest and recover."

He felt heavy anyway and knowing his brother was near was soothing. Deseem let the heaviness pull him down but found himself unable to fully slip away. His body was weak, exhausted but he didn't feel tired enough to sleep. Around him was hushed speaking and he felt the soothing warmth of a Healer's energies brush against him.

"He's not getting any better?" He heard his brother whisper a moment later.

"My Prince, thanks be to God he's as good as he is."

"His words are still slurred."

"And they may continue to be. We have no Soulhealer among us and if we did, the damage done to his mind may not be reversible."

"He is healing?"

"Slowly, yes. You must understand, the trauma done to him from the cleansing added in with the trauma of being Fetched? It's a wonder he's as stable as he is."

"Will they find him acceptable?"

"Who is to say what these barbarians will find unacceptable. He will be much recovered when we arrive and as you say, there are the final details of the treaty to be resolved in person."

"See to it he is, Priest. I can not divorce my wife to marry their Prince."

Deseem wasn't sure he heard the words properly but the idea made him tremble. It seemed that he'd been saved from one marriage only to be forced into another. The Priest chuckled a little.

"No, indeed you can not, My Prince."

Next Chapter

Story Home

Home

Snowflakes and Embers

Chapter Seven

Liam knew from talking to other people that home normally didn't invoke a sense of dread but he wasn't like other people. Most of the guards he had chatted with, even been friendly with had openly confessed to finding great pleasure in their leave time and chances to return to their hometowns. Watchers too spoke wistfully of small towns they'd left behind even if they'd known logically the magic they'd been born with had made them isolated there. Maybe if his life had taken different turns, he'd sit around a fire and grin with them and talk about fond childhood memories, but it hadn't and he didn't and home knotted up his stomach whenever he was forced to return.

It had taken a direct order this time and he had obeyed instantly. The order had suggested he rest and recover but his hope was that if he arrived exhausted and looking road worn they'd all just leave him the hell alone. All he wanted was to make the visit and leave again, hopefully back to the Fisher coast. He liked it there, it was peaceful. He needed peaceful.

Corinth, the crown city of Corena was far from peaceful but Liam had never found a city he loved more. It was vibrant and alive, a hundred cultures blended here, a hundred different temples rose to offer worship to a hundred different Gods. A man could eat at a different place for a year and never sample the same food twice. There was nobility and people so poor they didn't have shoes and vibrant markets that bustled with life. He could turn a corner and be in a neighborhood that could have been in a city a thousand miles away and completely forget he was in his home city. There were houses being built and ones that were centuries old, families moving in and lineage that traced back in time.

He did love the city, just not all the extra troubles being home brought up. Because his home wasn't in the alive and swirling streets, but behind the Faststay wall. It was difficult to picture the Corinth as it was, centuries before, as a vast forest that circled an empty valley with only a small, stone temple to the Death Queen and a few brave houses. Back before the Watchers had brought Corena the first here for refuge, and their kingdom had grown from there.

The forest still stood, untouched with wide ancient trees that even people born and bred on it's doorstep whispered about in hushed tones. No one ventured into the woods without good cause and express permission. The spirits that lived there were strong and wild and didn't like trespassers. The forest curved around the valley, sheltering it on three sides and provided a better protection than the massive Faststay wall could.

From a military standpoint, it seemed insane to build the palace, the government buildings, the training for all Guard officers and Watchers, in the bowl of a valley with no defensible high ground but the city had held and Faststay had been breeched only once and that was a voluntary surrender.

As the reach and power of the kingdom had grown people had arrived. They'd built their homes

outside the valley, outside of where the Faststay wall had been pulled up from the earth and the city proper of Corinth had grown in wild tumbled organic chaos from there. No one had planned it, the streets twisted and wound and an outsider could easily grow hopelessly lost. Even long time residents that moved away for a decade often returned to find the city changed, trendy neighborhoods became markets, markets became homes, taverns grew into temples and temples occasionally into brothels. The only thing that didn't change was the wide berth everyone gave to Faststay.

The city sat back from the wall by hundreds of yards as if a line had been drawn. The open area had been turned to grassy parks but seldom played host to anyone. Liam wasn't blind, the nearest building was safely back from the wall's shadow, even at it's longest, as if the shadow of the wall could spill some of the frightful chaos of the forest onto their lives. Not that he could blame them, the Faststay wall was a thing of legend.

He'd grown up with the sight of it and it still awed him each time he arrived or left. There were no seams, no breaks where blocks had been cut and moved and sealed together. The wall hadn't been built but called from the earth and risen up like some plant in a garden. It curved over the ridge of the hill, simply butting against the forest on both ends and was a good twenty-five feet wide on average. Some spots were closer to forty but none was more narrow than twenty-five. And tall, Faststay was thirty feet high.

It was an impressive sight. A wall so tall, so seamless, so thick, gleaming of smooth, slick pink tinted stone in the day's sunlight was bound to awe anyone. There were only three gates to pass through; Sourtin, Distin, and Mickstin but no one called them that.

Merchants gate was to one side. It was wide and busy with traffic. Carts, wagons and people always were coming and going. The roads that lead from Merchants gate into the valley below connected to the quartermaster's buildings and from there, supplies were delivered across the valley. As a boy he'd sometimes sit and watch the smooth movements of the merchants coming and going. They came and went so often that the beauty of the valley didn't stop them like tourists but he'd been fascinated by the ordered patterns of the movements, the predictability of their arrivals and departures.

Travelers gate was in the center. Grander, more ornate and wide enough for two large carriages to pass at once, that was the gate most people that came and went used. It's how senators and their households arrived for session; the path nobles and ambassadors took. It was well stationed and guarded and the people that came and went were fine to look at.

The only gate that mattered to Liam was Farewells. Farewells gate was off to the side like Merchants but smaller, able to pass only a carriage at a time and while guarded, the guards there were more support staff. Farewells, was the Guard and Watchman's gate, the one new trainees arrived through and a good percentage of them washed out through. It was the gate every Guard officer rode out from and off to take up their new commands. It was the gate every Watcher rode from, alone, as was their tradition. No one looked back, ever, when passing through Farewells and far too many people rode out never to ride back.

Technically there was a fourth gate but it wasn't really a gate. Healer's Hall had been grown into the wall, swooping up three stories higher than Faststay and bulging out on either side. It was a large square, pink blocky building with no ornament and an entrance to the city and one into the valley below. Inside the best Priest, Independent, and Watcher Healers worked like a small army. It was as seamlessly a part of the wall as the rooms, barracks, and offices that had been molded from the raw stone inside the wall. A larger pocket in the honeycomb hive of life that buzzed inside, on top of and around the fabled Faststay wall.

Liam should have gone right to Healer's Hall and had him declared unfit for whatever duty his family was plotting but he just wanted his room and his bed. He rode to Farewells, Baxter darting ahead. The dog was huge, his shoulder came nearly to Liam's waist and his stamina seemed

bottomless. Liam suspected that the dog was smarter than a lot of the people he had to deal with and he knew the animal was far better mannered and trained.

The guard at Farewells stepped back at Liam's approach, he nodded slightly which was an unspoken signal that there were no orders waiting for him at the gate itself and an equally unspoken welcome home. Liam nodded back and didn't stop moving. He rode through the walls darkness into the dazzling light of the valley.

The hillside sloped gently down and his horse whickered, happy to be back to the green pastures and lush grasses. The palace sat in a series of tall, boxy buildings back near the forest. The buildings had been created over centuries but none were overly ornate with only a few façade walls being fancied up for visiting ambassadors to be impressed with. Around the palace buildings were tucked hedge mazes and walled in gardens, set aside for the use of the royal family and guests of the palace.

Beside it sat the senate building, smaller, slightly grander. It's front was round with many doors to enter and exit by. Liam's father had explained once it was built that way so no one would be required to defer to anyone else, a Senator of noble blood entered at the same time as one born to more common roots. The curved front was attached to a more squared building and inside was the voting hall and their offices.

There was a swath of green before more buildings rose up. These were divided into two sections. In one, the Guard trained their officers. Liam could see squads running in unison. The blue of their uniform crisp and bright, the color of the sky above them and a bright spot of color against the shades of green.

Beside their barracks were buildings of classrooms. Space was shared between the Guard and the Watchers, the two groups had to work together and be comfortable around each other even if their training was vastly different. Some of the classes were joint, some segregated but all were in the same clusters of classrooms.

Beyond the classrooms were the dorms for the Watcher trainees and closer to the palace and the forest were the buildings that served as barracks for all the Watchman. Watchers gave up their families, their homes, few lived to see retirement but those that did, often had no family to return to and simply settled full time in the barracks, teaching as they could. Active duty Watchers were kept inside the wall to teach or work but all were ready to ride off at a moments notice and the ones, like Liam, that preferred the more hands on work of riding patrol had rooms that were far too often closed up and covered in drapes. Too many of the Watcher's rooms stood empty now, too many of them had been slaughtered in the war and the process to replace their numbers was slow.

Baxter had spent more of his life outside the green valley than in it but the dog leapt and barked as if he was returning to a fond, well known home. He darted down the road ahead of Liam zipping about in circles and scaring birds to flight. It lightened Liam's mood and he half wondered if the dog was a clown just to cheer him, and he found himself smiling slightly as he rode to the wide, large stables to return his horse.

There were other Watchers there, dressed in the crisp, tailored, understated black uniforms they all wore and they glanced up as he dismounted and handed the reins to a groom. At most, they nodded in greeting at him as they would any other returning Watcher but the trainees that stood about openly stared.

"Welcome back, sir." The groom smiled.

"Thank you." Liam tugged and got his dusty pack from behind his saddle and let the man lead the animal away. "Come on Baxter, I need some sleep." The dog had been watching the trainees with suspicious care. He didn't like it when humans stared at them but he was too well trained to

bark without cause. "Come on, they wouldn't even be a snack for you." He ran a hand over the smooth coated wide head and the dog put his ears down and tongue lolled a happy look up at him. The trainees in their black uniforms with varying widths of gray bands looked younger than he remembered and he ignored them knowing his hair and appearance left little doubt as to which Watcher he was. Before the war, the sideways looks bothered him. Now, he didn't care, didn't sigh or even frown over it and just let them stare.

"Liam!"

He would know that voice anywhere and he should have known, he couldn't have made it home and back to his room without being greeted. Baxter's tail started wagging a mile a minute and the dog pranced about a little while the man in a Watcher black uniform sprinted the last yards down the walkway.

Auburn haired that had gone brown and hazel eyed, there was little features in common between the brothers. Liam was taller, leaner and more classically handsome than his brother. The only thing they'd had in common as children was red hair. Lach's had gone brown as he'd aged, Liam's had turned white.

There was no thought to shyness or second thoughts, Lach laughed and tumbled against him, pulling Liam into a back slapping hug, laughing in his ear. "I've missed you! Did you have safe travels?"

"As safe as can be expected. I've missed you, too."

Lach chuckled as he pulled away, bringing a handful of the thick, long white hair with him. "You weren't kidding about the hair, mother is going to have a fit."

He shrugged. "Healer went a little overboard but it did help me work with the Fishers."

He snorted. "The things we do all because a Fisher won't give a man the time of day, or a moment in their bed, unless his hair is at least mid-back."

Liam refused to blush but he nodded. "Something like that."

"And Baxter, Lady bless, he's huge!" Lach held his hand out to the huge dog and the animal slinked over to rub and beg for petting. "It's a mistake, he's not a dog he's a small pony. What are you feeding this beast?"

"Pretty much anything he wants."

"Such a good boy, such a good, good boy!" Lach baby talked and scratched the dog's ears. "Here let me get your pack, you look ready to fall over. You should have rested some and then made the trip. The storm really was that bad, wasn't it?"

"Three days in trance in prep, four more working non-stop while it crested and another two after to make sure it didn't reform somewhere else. It was a handful. Spawned tornados and flooding and well, what a mess."

A mess that Lach knew his brother had enjoyed, for all the work it had been. Even speaking of it now brought a faint smile to his face. He pulled the hair back over his own shoulder, brushing faint road dust off his spotless uniform. "Have you heard any family gossip?"

"Very little."

"I'll catch you up."

"I'm sorry..." Liam stopped and glanced to the ground in front of his feet.

"What for this time? You've been home oh... half an hour? Even you couldn't have caused trouble that quickly."

"For not coming back for your wedding. I know I should have, I just..." He couldn't. He'd wanted to but he just couldn't bring himself to return. "I'm glad you found someone to make you happy."

The apology almost broke his heart and Lach saw some of the fragileness, he'd hoped was gone for good, flicker across his brother's face. He caught Liam's face between his hands and forced him to look up. "Don't be sorry. I'm sorry to have recalled you now. I'd have kept you out on patrol for as long as you needed if you weren't needed back here. I understand, Bekka understands and she's eager to get to know you. We're expecting our first child."

That surprised him. When he'd returned from the war, he'd been too hurt and heartbroken to care much and the moment he'd been well enough he'd left. That had been over two years ago and his only bits of family gossip came in the form of the occasional letter from Lach. He'd known it had been unfair but his brother had wed less than six months after Liam had left and he'd had no strength to return. He'd known logically they'd have children, he just hadn't been prepared for it emotionally.

"Congratulations. Father must be thrilled."

"He is, he is and Bekka is driving me insane. She swears she's never getting pregnant again." He laughed but he saw the shadows in his brother's blue eyes. "But we'll talk about that later. Let's get you back to your room, I have food being sent, you have to tell me about the Fisher Coast. I kept trying to think of an excuse to come out and visit you but sadly the duties of the Captain tend to be desk bound."

"Why was I recalled, Lach?"

"Later, when you officially report in, tonight let's just catch up."

He pressed his lips into a thin line and tried not to get angry. Whatever the reason or cause, it couldn't be good because Lach felt guilty over it. That never was a good thing. It was the same guilt Lach had before ordering him to the border and the fighting. Fortunately, he was too tired to care tonight and the idea of just not thinking about it was an appealing one.

"Okay." He agreed carefully. "But when I report in first thing tomorrow someone had better explain."

Next Chapter

Story Home

Home

Snowflakes and Embers

Chapter Eight

It was sitting in his room, freshly aired out and opened up upon word of his return, sharing food and conversation with his brother that was really home. Lach settled into 'his' chair as if Liam had never gone anywhere and didn't allow a moment of uncomfortable silence. They talked about family and palace gossip, Liam shared stories of the coast and they avoided all mention of any subject that might be raw and still painful.

In the end, in spite of his exhaustion and Baxter yawning and snoring on his rug, Liam was truly sorry when his brother took his leave. It left him alone in his single room and the emptiness of the building. Most of the rooms were empty, those that had lived there were lost in the war and the few that remained or who had taken their place were off on patrols. The emptiness suited his mood and need for privacy and he was pleased to find plenty of hot water in the bathing room and no one to complain about how much he used.

The hot water and steam worked out knots in his back and shoulders he didn't know he was carrying. Even while with the Fishers and their tradition of cold baths, Liam had cheated and heated the water to near scalding. The privacy and body shyness they carried as a culture had made it easy, no one was likely to spy on him while he was bathing and he just as easily cooled the water when he was finished. It was just nice to have a hot bath without having to spend a thought and flicker of energy to heat the water.

"Not sure I could spare a flicker." He muttered and sighed, sinking up to his chin in the deep tub. Without him being willing to tend it, the water went cold and he was forced to either try to focus and re-heat it or climb out.

He opted to climb out, wrapped thick towels around his body and hair and padded on bare feet back down the hall to his room. It wasn't like he had much body shyness nor was it likely anyone would see. A quick check had shown, he was literally the only person on his floor at the moment.

Back in his room he locked the door. Normally he slept fully clothed, with his boots on and on the ground but he was home. Even if it was for a short time, he was going to live like a civilized soul and not some wild land barbarian. He dried off and pulled on under britches only, laying out a crisp uniform the building servants had taken from storage for him. Near the bed he propped his boots and his sword and pulled back the heavy covers on the soft bed. It wasn't big enough for two, not really but plenty big enough for one.

Baxter looked at him sadly from his rug bed and cocked his head to the side.

"Sneak, you know the rules." He sighed and laid down, betting that as soon as he was asleep the big dog would be on the bed, or as he'd done before, he'd have dragged his bed over to the floor closest to the bed and slept there. Liam tended to toss and turn too much in his sleep for the large dog to be too comfortable sleeping in a bed with him but some part of Baxter didn't know his own size and still assumed he could shove into the same small space he'd occupied as a puppy.

Even with how early he retired to sleep, it was closer to noon before he woke up and then it was only because Baxter was pestering him to go out. He yawned and stretched and took his time dressing, the spare uniforms he'd left for his return were still baggy, he hadn't returned to his pre-war weight and wondered if the paring down he'd gone through in the war would stay. Baxter didn't care if he was unshaven, his hair still rumpled and while technically a Watcher was supposed to be well groomed and in a sharp crisp uniform at all times, Liam was willing to flip off anyone that tried to scold him for his appearance.

There was a small garden yard behind his building, Liam hadn't been the first Watcher with a pet

over the centuries and he was still yawning while he followed the dog as he bounded around the provided space. He'd offered to clean up after Baxter when he was given the puppy but the gardeners had laughed and promised it was no hassle. They might reconsider if he offered again, Baxter pooped larger piles than a horse.

"Come on boy." He yawned again and the dog bounced happily over to his side. Baxter raced up the steps to the top floor their room was on and down the hallway. The door was cracked open and inside Liam found a tray of food and steaming hot tea. His bed had been made and Baxter's food bowl filled.

He'd made a comment once that he preferred to be left alone and do things on his own and had no trouble making it to one of the dining halls but that apparently was unacceptable. Now they just waited until he was out of the room to slip in and straighten up, dust and such and most meals, were always delivered. The servants assigned to the buildings Watchers lived in took pride in caring for their charges and he'd almost have to beat them away with sticks if he really wanted to be left alone.

Baxter ate with glee, Liam ate because he had to. He knew his body needed the food as much as it needed sleep but even after sleeping almost to the point of giving himself a headache, he was still far more tired than hungry. Truth was, he'd been pushing too hard for the last couple of years and had little reserves left from the war. He was burned out, exhausted, and needed some down time to recover. Just, he would have picked a nice quiet Watch post on the coast instead of inside the wall of Corinth to rest.

He ate as much as he could, convinced they'd brought him extra to try to fatten him up, and skipped the soaking tubs in lieu of a quicker spraying shower. He shaved and dressed and combed his hair out but left it fall, moonlight pale against the black, loose down his back. Even taking his time and trying not to rush, he still found old habits hard to break and was ready to face the day far sooner than he would have wished.

Baxter followed him out the building and over to an administration building, gaining nearly as many looks as Liam himself did on the way to his brother's office. The Watcher in black in the outer office was older than Lach but had flatly refused to be promoted, claiming he'd rather remain a secretary and do something he loved than be promoted and be out of his depth.

"He's waiting for you."

"Thanks." He opened the door to the plain square office filled with a large desk and odd mismatched chairs. It had been the Captain of the Watchers office for centuries and seemed to have collected a centuries worth of paperwork that covered every flat surface. Liam walked in, shut the door, crisply covered three steps toward the desk and fell to attention. "Watcher Liam reporting as ordered, sir, and awaiting new orders."

Lach stood up, smiling softly and slipped a sealed folded piece of paper from a stack. "Your orders." He handed the paper over. "And really, formalities? You can't be that angry at having been recalled."

"Hm." He took the paper and broke the seal.

"You slept forever. I was worried you'd skipped back to the border." Lach leaned on the edge of his desk and watched his brother's eyes while he scanned the paper. Liam's face rarely gave away anything any more but his eyes always betrayed him.

"This is a joke right?"

Lach raised an eyebrow.

"You recalled me for a check up?" He tossed the paper back onto the desk. "There's hundreds of Healers between here and the coast and you pull me three weeks ride inland just to have me turn my head and cough?"

"Liam..."

"No, mother ordered this didn't she? She can't leave well enough alone. She'd have me be an invalid the rest of my life!"

"Liam, there's more to this than mother being controlling. I promise you but I'm not allowed to speak of it yet. Go to the Hall, get checked out. Janaria and Jasaria are expecting you. Come by the palace tonight for dinner, they've made it an unofficial order and I'm betting they tell you what's really going on then. Okay?"

"It's still bullshit and you know it."

"Liam." The brother he'd known before the war would have raged in screaming anger when this upset. Now Liam was just as angry but he bottled it all in, tucked it all away and that was not a good idea for a man that held as much power as his brother did.

"I know, I know." He sighed and rubbed at the bridge of his nose. "I'll get Jan to get rid of this headache while I'm over there. There had better be a good reason for this stupidity or I will file a formal protest. Mother may be Queen but if she had me ride all those miles just to make sure I'm sane, I will not be amused."

He was still angry when he crossed the valley and found his way into the Healer's Hall. It was slow inside for a change, with only half the main floor in use and handfuls of trainees moving about cleaning, prepping emergency carts, taking inventory and all the dozens of small tasks that got dumped on their shoulders. He didn't make it a dozen steps before one of the Guard medics stopped him.

"I'm sorry Watcher, no pets allowed in the Hall."

"It's alright, Medic, Baxter is smarter than the average pet."

The dog began to wiggle like mad as the slender, plain, dark haired woman with her hair in a tight braid down her back came over to join them. Janaria and her twin Jasaria were Liam's second cousins and amazing Healers, Janaria of the body and her sister Jas of the soul. They'd gone independent but stayed at the Hall, teaching and working and they were about the only set of Healers Liam really trusted.

"As you say, Healer." The guard nodded and stepped back.

"Liam, you look dreadful." She grinned and pulled the taller man into a tight hug. "I'd heard you'd gotten in yesterday. A partition here or someplace more private?"

"Depends on how invasive you're planning on being."

She just smiled sweetly.

He sighed. "Office, too drafty down here for me to be running around naked."

"Jas has her office warmed up just for you and you'll be right there for her when I'm done having my evil way with you."

He knew better than to protest and knew that they'd set it up so he'd have to talk to Jas when Jan was done with him. They worked well together, that was one of their greatest strengths. Didn't

hurt that they were slender, pretty and utterly non-threatening looking and so identical in all but their magic that they were nearly impossible to tell apart. Liam followed her up the long sloping ramps up to the fourth floor and down the hall to the office the sisters shared.

"Liam!" Jas hurried around her desk and hugged him as tightly as her sister had. They even smiled alike. "It's so good to see you, we've missed you so much."

"As pleased as I am to see you too, I wish it was for other reasons. I'm overdue for a nap, can we get this over with?" He gave Baxter a subtle hand signal and the dog found an out of the way spot and laid down.

"Of course, want me to leave?"

He shrugged. "Isn't like you both haven't seen me bare assed naked more times than I can count and thank you for heating up the office for me."

Jas grinned. "Of course dear, now be nice and get undressed."

Liam was used to being checked over by a Healer and Jan was very good at her job. He held still, stripped to his skin, as she checked him over from head to toe with her physical eyes and training and her magic. He actually didn't mind Healers, the sharp heat the touch of their magic caused often unnerved people but he'd always found it soothing. It was a little creepy knowing she could stop his heart with a thought and a strong enough effort but he'd never met a Healer that had a mean bone in their bodies. She paused several times to take notes on a clipboard but otherwise made little comment until she stepped back and smiled.

"Okay, you can get dressed now."

"Finally. Sure you don't want to peek under my toenails or check my belly button for lint?" He tugged on his under britches and tied them around his waist.

"Don't be bitter and there was no lint. Having any problems? Been ill lately?"

"Just tired." He shook his head and didn't find her joke amusing because it was most likely true.

"Eating regular meals? Sleeping well?"

"As regular as I can manage and as much as I can."

"No trouble sleeping?"

"Right now?"

"Now and before."

"Now, I'm tired enough to sleep through the world ending. Before, well about as well as can be expected. I sleep enough."

"You haven't been ill recently?"

"Not that I've noticed. Why, what did you see?"

"Nothing important." She smiled.

"Do I get to see your report or does it go directly to mother?"

"Tomorrow if you want to read it, come by."

"After mother's seen it tonight?"

"She is my Queen and has the right to know the well being of any Watcher in service to the crown."

"I know, just galling sometimes." He kept dressing hoping that Jas would be less demanding than her sister and he'd be able to go home for a nap before dinner.

"I can imagine. Now, I'll leave you two alone while I go process this into a report." She paused at the door. "It really is good to have you home, Liam."

"Thanks, Jan."

"Shall I have tea sent up?" Jas asked as she moved easily forward to claim one of the soft, well stuffed chairs as her own.

"Will I be here that long?"

Just like her sister, she simply smiled gently and didn't answer.

"No, I'm fine, thank you." He sat in another disgustingly comfortable chair and tugged his boots back on. "What is it you want to know?"

"I was hoping we could just talk. Tell me about the Fishers?"

It was an easy way to get him to relax and start talking but Liam didn't mind. He was committed to being honest with her. Over the years he'd told her things that he'd been unable to say to anyone, not even Lach and he trusted her as much as he was able to trust anyone. Eventually she'd ask more direct questions but for now she was going to feel him out with unimportant stories and he was okay with that. He settled in and tried to tell her stories of his time on the coast, tried to call up the memories so sharply, so vividly that she'd experience some of it as he spoke and when the smile on her face grew wistful, he knew he was succeeding.

"It sounds like you really like it out there."

"I do." He admitted easily. "The Fisher's have such a quiet strength. I know they get mocked for being so proper but they're so much more complicated than what you see on the surface. I don't have to be anything around them. They aren't impressed with who my parents are and they aren't frightened of me because of what I can do."

"You've mentioned villages and the Fishers collectively but no one specifically. Did you make any friends?"

He shrugged. "Fishers rarely befriend outsiders."

"Any lovers?"

"A few, both Fisher and members of the Guard."

"But no one you were close to?"

"Fishers will take an outsider to their bed but not their hearts and you know how it is with Watchers and Guards, we move around too much and take too many chances to get too attached. It was friendly." He glanced to his hands and forced his fingers to relax. "I haven't been celibate, took a couple of months but... well... I'm not the one who died."

"Liam..."

He smiled a little, gently. "It's okay, ask."

"Last we spoke you were conflicted, what with you and Dorena and Norlan..."

"About which I preferred? Men or women?"

She nodded. It was a sensitive subject and one that had stumbled Liam when he'd wed. Liam who had been a studious trainee and a virgin on his wedding night. He hadn't known quite what to do with all of the sudden and unexpected desires he'd found.

"I've had lovers of both genders." He admitted. "More men than women..."

"From choice?"

He nodded. "Yeah. I know, it's not that big of an issue here and shouldn't be but that's all of them..."

"Them?"

"People...you know, society...they may not have an issue with being kree but they don't have to deal with it. Norlan doesn't think of himself as kree. He always said don't worry about the names just be happy in your own skin."

"He's a smart man. Are you happy in your own skin, Liam?"

He shook his head. "Not even on my best day."

Next Chapter

Story Home

Home

Snowflakes and Embers

Chapter Nine

Jas kept him for hours, chatting about nothing and weaving in questions that made his stomach knot up but Liam tried to be as honest with her as he could. Jan's report would clearly show he'd downplayed some of the injuries he'd gotten while on patrol but Jas's wouldn't even hint at sharing anything private or personal and because of that he felt free to say anything without worry.

When she'd hugged him again and turned him loose, he was tired again and instead of taking Baxter for a walk, he took the dog to one of the gardens and let him fetch a stick while Liam just sat on a bench and chewed over all Jas had said to him and all he'd said to her. When the dog seemed less eager to bring the chewed up stick back, Liam took them back to his room and

settled in for a nap before dinner. He slept but it wasn't restful and woke up feeling strained and uneasy about having to see his family for the first time in years.

He showered again and shaved again and dressed in a slightly more formal uniform, one step above a day to day and one step below court formal a prince was expected to wear. It was the most formal a normal Watcher had to wear, Watcher-Princes were a different story.

Most Watchers complained about the dress uniform, how rigid and formal it was but Liam had always liked it. It felt snug, secure. He'd spent the better part of his childhood in formal clothes, sitting quietly at court functions, fulfilling the role of a good Prince. While he liked the comfort and mobility of the everyday uniform, the dress uniform felt like he was putting on armour for battle. It made it easier to face his family.

Baxter may be allowed at Healer's Hall but he would get scolded for taking the dog with him to a family dinner. He could justify letting the dog follow along to court or other functions but the large dog would be seen with the same scorn Liam's old stuffed horse had been viewed, as some childish security blanket. Which he was man enough to admit that Baxter was but he was a security blanket that heard trouble before Liam did, allowed him to sleep without worry of attack and if jumped he was one with very large teeth and a very strong jaw.

"Next time boy, here look, they brought you a bone to chew over." He ruffled the velvety floppy ears and petted the broad head before he gave the dog the command to stay as he left the door. Baxter didn't fuss or bark but he did whine a little when the door shut behind him.

Norlan had given him Baxter as a pup and Liam had often wondered what conversations the man had held with the dog before delivering him. Norlan's magic was Animal Empathy and while he claimed he couldn't actually speak to animals, Baxter made Liam wonder. The dog was deeply loyal to him and often fussed at him if he didn't take care of himself properly. It was sad but in the last couple of years, Baxter became his best friend, the dog didn't glance away if he was upset and didn't flinch when Liam made his magic obvious.

His family was another story and Liam felt his shoulders knot up as he made his way to the palace grounds, then around a side garden to a small door that would let him directly into the royal families private areas. The last thing he needed was to be stopped every dozen feet to have someone want just a word with him. As it was he was going to be the last to arrive, and he just hoped they wouldn't nag at him for it.

The room used for private family dinners hadn't changed as their family had grown. It was cozy with warm wood paneling and a table that was large enough to sit them all but not massive. They would still have a servant or three to bring food in and pour wine but for the most part it was a casual affair compared to dinner at court. Liam would rather have dinner at court, where his family would be too occupied to deal with him.

"Thank you." Liam whispered to the servant that opened the door for him and slipped into the family's private dining room.

"Liam!" A pretty blonde woman smiled and came quickly over to greet him.

"Celeste." He smiled gently but his eyes darted from his sister-in-law to give the room a quick scan and sure enough he was the last to arrive, even if his parents stood near another entrance talking with Senator De Jopin. "You look well." The words were automatic but they were the truth. The women of Yorlend were famed for their delicate beauty that aged well and Celeste was no exception. She was all blonde hair and fair pink toned skin with bright green eyes.

"You look well yourself. The women of court are all twittering over the word of your return."

Courtly love and matchmaking were full contact sports on Yorlend. The women enhanced their

beauty with smiles, fluttering fans, and pretending to be empty headed fluffs, requiring compliments and gifts. Liam knew otherwise, Celeste did everything in her power to be thought of as empty headed but she was sharply intelligent and would make a good queen one day.

"She's lying, you look like hell." Malcome added as he came over and partially placed himself between his wife and his brother.

"Malcome."

"Nice hair."

"Hey, brothers of mine." Lach grinned with an almost manic smile and quickly pressed wine glasses into both men's hands. "Liam's been home about a day, could you two please wait at least two days before fighting like spoiled children."

"So long as everyone acts as adults, I think it could be avoided." Liam answered but his eyes were locked with his oldest brother's.

Celeste glanced between the two men, like she was looking at the children Lach accused them of being, a moment before she slipped forward and took Liam's arm. She knew her husband didn't trust his youngest sibling but she also refused to have his arrival home marred with stupidity. "Here now, Liam, let me re-introduce you to Bekka since someone here has left her alone and forgotten." She gave Lach a scolding look and pulled Liam away to the side where Bekka sat, roundly pregnant.

"Cut him a break." Lach whispered

"We both know he's going to lose it tonight, do you want to be anywhere near him when he snaps?" Malcome just shook his head and moved to reclaim his wife and get her away from his brother.

"He wouldn't hurt us." Lach whispered with no one around to hear him. Malcome had quite obviously moved Celeste away with the offer to help her to her seat. He didn't miss the sharp sting of pain that cut across Liam's eyes.

Dinner was as awkward and painful as Liam had expected. His parents stayed busy until forced to sit down and the first word he was able to share with them was over the start of dinner. He was questioned about his travels, about the coast and the Fishers, teased a little about his hair but by the main course the conversation easily moved away from him. By the end of dinner, he may as well have been back on the coast for all that anyone even glanced at him, all but Lach and his looks of apology just made things worse.

"Mother, Father..." Liam kept his eyes on his wine glass. "Perhaps we could retire from the table and you could tell me why I was recalled?"

The table went silent and his parents exchanged a look. Their father, Korin had been born in the royal line and was by far gentler and more indulgent. It was their mother, Relina that pushed them. She was the one more likely to make the hard choices.

"I don't believe we need to retire from the table." Relina said without flinching. "Unless you wish your medical report to be discussed in private?"

He thought about it but there was nothing in it that he was ashamed of. "I've nothing to hide."

She folded her hands in front of her. "You mean other than the fact that you fell from a cliff and nearly drowned, were dragged from a horse and reported it as nothing more than scratches?"

"My injuries weren't severe and they didn't interfere with my performance. What's really going on?"

"Liam..." Korin said gently. "It's never easy to be a child of the royal line."

"No one needs to remind me of that, Father." Malcome was watching him like he was some bizarre bug and Bekka's dark brown eyes were sad. What worried him the most was that Lach was refusing to look at him.

"For the better part of a year, we've been in quiet discussion with an ambassador from Bastion, working out a treaty. Two months ago, Prince Irendorialah, his family and party arrived to finalize details."

Liam glanced around the table. "I haven't spoken Bastion in close to three years and haven't read it in far longer."

"Liam, the treaty is solid and sound..."

Relina placed a hand on her husband's arm. "Bastion is having some internal troubles, it isn't open civil war but blood is being shed. King Restonarinach will not accept this treaty because Prince Irendorialah is in partial rebellion. The only way to secure it is with a marriage."

"No." Liam whispered and had to force his hands from his wine glass to keep from crushing it in his grip. "I've already accepted one treaty marriage, that should be enough."

"Should be, yes and if there was a single other way to force King Restonarinach to acknowledge this treaty we would have pursued it." Korin answered gently.

"Malcome can not break from Celeste, their marriage is rooted in a treaty. Lachlin can not break with Bekka. Our laws do not allow a man to break with his pregnant wife and she is not due for several more months." Relina refused to mention Shelia, their daughter who would have happily taken this marriage had she lived through the war.

"I would never ask that of either of them." Liam heard himself speaking and knew it was the truth.

"Well, both Bekka and Lach offered, so greatly do they care for you." Korin added into the silent room.

Liam felt lightheaded. "This is asking too much. I don't know if I can be fair to a Bastion wife."

"Would you risk open conflict simply because you don't wish to marry again?" Malcome asked and ignored the hard look his wife, Bekka, and Lach gave him.

"How dare you?" Liam hissed. "You never came within fifty miles of the border, you only know what it was like from reports. Do you think I am so selfish that I would chance sending more of our people back into that hell?"

"So you'll accept this marriage?" Relina asked, ignoring the spat of anger between her oldest and youngest sons.

"I will do what is my duty. As much as it sickens me."

"There's more." Lach added.

That made Liam laugh a little, teetering on hysterics and panic. "How can there be more than this?"

There was a long pause when no one at the table was quite willing to answer and it fell to Relina again. "The bride is Bentan."

"Bentan?" Liam let the word roll around in his head. He'd heard of it or read it but it wasn't a term he knew instantly.

"The bride is a young man. King Restonarinach has reinstated an old custom where younger sons, once cloistered only for the priesthood, may be offered as Bentan brides in place of a daughter. Once wed, they assume the life and role of a female in Bastion society and it's never again spoken of that they are, in truth, male." Relina explained with a forced casualness to her voice. "King Restonarinach has only sons left. His eldest which no one has seen in years, Prince Irendorialah his second born son and his youngest, Prince Deseemdamiah who was declared Bentan by his father."

Liam drained his glass of wine in a long, single, gulping swallow. "I'm to wed someone from Bastion and that someone is a man, who we're all supposed to pretend is a woman?" He looked to his mother to tell him he'd gone insane between the main and desert course.

"Yes, that's correct. At least until Prince Irendorialah and his party return to Bastion. After that time I can't see anyone referring to the poor boy as a she."

"This is ridiculous."

"Why look..." Lach said softly to Malcome. "We've told him and he didn't pull the palace down around our ears."

"I'm not happy with this, at all, but I will do what my King and Queen wish." He forced out, knowing they'd simply make it a direct order if he protested. If they had to do that, there would be no hope of every resolving the problems he had with his family. "As soon as we're wed, I assume I can return to my patrol?"

That earned him another uneasy look around the table.

"What now?"

"Bentan brides are governed by different rules. They've been even more strictly cloistered than a normal Bastion bride. Tradition states that the husband must keep the bride close by his side. Our tradition is that civilians can not ride patrol with a Watcher. There is some flexibility, after a few years when a Bentan has settled into his...her...his new life, they can be left with the husband's family for periods of time."

Liam blinked, stunned, at his mother. "A few years..." He was tempted to reach across the table and snag Lach's wine glass and finish his drink as well. "A few years." He nodded and pushed the anger and trapped dread feeling down, told himself not to feel it. "Okay, a few years. When do I get to meet this Bentan?"

"You don't." Lach figured their mother shouldn't be the only one to break the bad news. "Bastion brides never meet their husbands before the wedding night. Occasionally the husband is allowed a word or two with his bride before hand but it's always monitored and Irendorialah has refused that. You are expected to meet Irendorialah and will be allowed to see Deseemdamiah from a distance so long as he can't see you."

Liam rubbed his eyes and wondered if they really would arrest him if he made a run for the coast. "This just gets better and better, doesn't it?"

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Chapter Ten

By the next afternoon the entire city was buzzing about the marriage. Rumors of a treaty had been shifting about the city for months but nothing solid had really been known. Gossip was always whispered over but rarely believed in Corinth and even the rumor of a Bastion prince impressed few enough people.

Word of a real treaty and a marriage to seal it was another story. By the time Liam was dressed and ready for the day several dozen letters had been delivered to his room. No one was quite bold enough to come by but it did seem like everyone wanted something. He ignored them and left them unopened on the table.

It was dress uniforms again and having to leave weapons and Baxter behind. Liam brushed his hair out and left it loose, unwilling to cut it when he still hoped to be able to return fairly quickly to the Fisher coast. It was a small hope but one he needed to keep from screaming in rage at being forced into a marriage for the second time in his life.

He was still stewing over it when he reached the palace and was guided to a small side room to meet Lach. His stomach had been too knotted up to eat since he'd woken but he was considering a strong drink as soon as this current formality was over.

"You look pissed." Lach sighed.

"How am I supposed to look?"

"I guess I was hoping sleeping on it would settle you down some."

Liam snorted. "There has to be someone else."

"It has to be someone in the direct line to make sure the treaty is held. Restonarinach is unwilling to hold open conflict against his kin, which is how they're avoiding a full on civil war."

"I should have had Jas tell you I'm crazier than a spring duck and maybe gotten out of this." He brushed a few stray dog hairs from his uniform and really couldn't take his anger out on Lach.

"I doubt mother or Irendorialah would have found that as a disqualifying excuse."

"What sort of man is he? This prince?"

Lach shrugged. "Formal, fierce, honest, he doesn't pull his punches and play politics, he says what he means. If he wasn't Bastion, I'd bet you'd like him."

"I don't want to do this."

"I know. I'm sorry, I hope you can forgive me."

Liam shut his eyes. "To prevent another border war? I'd do far worse things than marry some Bastion man. What's he like? Missing a nose? Does he have a hump? Prepare me so I don't say something to cause a war in front of his brother."

"I don't know, I haven't seen him, he's always been veiled and silent, the same as all the other women in their party."

Liam tried to picture the ugliest man he could and braced himself for that. "Doesn't matter what he looks like, it's the treaty I'm marrying."

"Ready?"

"No and...Lach...thank you. I'm not sure I could do this alone."

"Welcome." He smiled. "And you wouldn't have, a male relation is supposed to accompany you. Can you see father, 'hmmm... yes, he will make a good wife for my son'." Lach said in the same wistful easy tone of their father and earned a nervous grin from his brother. "Or worse, Malcome! Malcome doesn't have a kree bone in his body, he wouldn't know what to say to seeing this fellow."

"Not even funny. He still hates me."

"He doesn't hate you, he's just afraid of you. Fear makes men do stupid things. Now, ready to do this so we can get it over with?"

He nodded but he wasn't ready, doubted he ever could be ready. He followed Lach through a connecting room to another side room, this one had a pair of royal guards in their crisp uniforms standing by the door. They opened the door smoothly as they drew close and Liam was glad to see them. Having anyone from Bastion inside the palace made him nervous, it was a worry he couldn't brush aside simply because they were now going to be officially at peace with the other kingdom. He'd have four times the number of guards on the prince and his party.

Liam may have been braced for an ugly Bentan bride but he wasn't braced to know the face of Prince Irendorialah. His blood froze and his body followed Lach simply on instinct. The early thought of running away to the coast didn't seem like such a crazy idea as fear curled around his spine and was quickly chased away by anger.

"Prince Irendorialah." Lach said smoothly, ignoring the Bastion prince's man servant that crouched down near where Irend was watching out a window. "I hope we haven't kept you waiting for long."

Irend turned and smiled but the smile didn't even make the black lines painted around his eyes move. "Watcher-Prince Lachlin, a pleasure to see you again. No, I have not waited long." He spoke in careful, oddly accented Trade. His eyes narrowed when he saw the man following the prince he'd been friendly with over the last few months.

"Prince Irendorialah, my youngest brother, Watcher-Prince Liam, just returned a day ago to fulfill the promise of the treaty." Lach glanced between the two men. "Have you two met?"

"We've been previously introduced." Liam heard himself answer.

"Firestarter, I've often wondered if you survived once you escaped."

"I wasn't aware our captors were of such good bloodlines."

"I have regretted handing anyone over to my father's anger, but I am more deeply sorry to learn I delivered another kingdom's Prince to him. It's a good thing he wasn't aware of your bloodlines, Firestarter or he would have been more cruel, you wouldn't have escaped."

Lach gave Liam a hard look, asking him silently to explain. "Regret does not bring the dead back." He drew a long, slow breath and pushed his anger as deeply down as he could manage. "The man in command of the squad that captured Dorena and myself, it seems is none other than Prince Irendorialah." He explained for Lach but his eyes didn't leave the dark haired man's. "And I am not just a Firestarter, you didn't look beyond your own magic." He knew it was stupid, knew there was no point to it but he pushed a little against Irend's energies just to make it clear that while he was unarmed, he wasn't helpless.

A look of startled surprise crossed Irend's face. "An Elemental, the Elemental." Something dark crossed the warrior's face. "I once walked into a camp and found three dozen men drowned in an open field. My advisors debated for months about how it was done. All our efforts to repeat it and link Windcallers and Waterseekers together to reproduce it failed. It was your handiwork."

Liam nodded. "It was."

"Perhaps I don't regret handing you to my father as much now. If I could have convinced my men to use their magic to kill so coldly, to shed off the guilt of the blood on their hands, as easily as you, this treaty would never have been necessary."

"Prince Irendorialah, in times of peace, memories of war must be set aside."

"No, Lach, it's okay. What he says is true. I deserve such scorn, I did monstrous things. Things I am not proud of, things war does not justify. Hate me as much as you will, Prince Irendorialah, and I will hold my hate for you close as well, but let us both atone for some of what we've done by seeing that it never happens again." Something inside crystallized and he understood why he wasn't half way back to the coast. This marriage was an atonement and while it couldn't remove his guilt, pain or memories, it was something small he could do.

"Is who we are and who we have been too much of an obstacle for this treaty?" Liam finally asked when the silence continued in the room.

Irend tried to study the pale man across from him and found the man as unreadable as he remembered. "I am fond of my littlest brother. I will not allow him to wed someone that will be cruel to him simply because of his being Bastion."

"He will become a member of my house and will be treated with the same respect as any member of my house." Liam almost said the words in Bastion, but wasn't quite ready to let the other man know he was fluent in their language.

"I will expect nothing less." Irend had no choice, they needed the trade provisions if they ever had a hope to gain enough strength to oppose his father. "Is there a special manner in which you would care to inspect my brother before accepting him?"

Lach looked to Liam and Liam looked to Lach, but neither one knew quite how to answer. "I'm not sure what answer to offer?" Lach finally said.

"Dressed, partially undressed, hair loose or braided...how would you wish to see him?"

How he wished the boy displayed, Liam felt sick. "I have no preference." He forced out around a clenched jaw and reminded himself not to grind his teeth. The last thing he needed was for Jan

to nag him about grinding his teeth.

Irend motioned to his man the way Liam might to Baxter and the fellow was as obedient. "Tell my brother to stand and have his hair unveiled, tell him to keep his eyes up so that we may see them from the window." He spoke softly in Bastion. "Go, now."

"Yes, my Prince." The man replied and hurried across the room to a door at the far end and quickly slipped outside.

"I have checked this several times. This time of day, the sun reflects from the glass. He will not be able to see in. Please." Irend motioned Liam to the window and stepped back to the side.

Any worry Liam had at being startled by an ugly bride was no longer to the front of his thoughts. The boy could have a second head growing from his shoulders and Liam doubted he'd blink twice at it. All he wanted was to nod and approve the boy and hurry back to his room, putting as much distance as he could between the man in his nightmares and the Bastion Prince standing close enough to touch.

He walked to the window carefully, Lach staying between Liam and Irend in a subtle unspoken way of trying to protect him a little and it took a moment for his eyes to adjust to the bright sunlight in the garden beyond. When it did he saw a figure sitting in the garden, face turned up to listen to the man servant speaking, wearing greens and pinks heavy with embroidery and looking like some rare spring flower.

Liam watched as the boy nodded and stood. The boy's head was bowed down, his hands clenched together tightly. The fingers loosened and skillfully unwove one length of fabric from around his head, letting dark hair in a multitude of braids tumble out. Liam didn't count anything odd about the boy's hands and saw no hump on his back. He found himself almost holding his breath as the boy shyly lifted his face, eyes downcast still.

"He's as beautiful as our mother was, a more beautiful Bentan can not be found. Veiled, no one has suspected him of not being my sister." Irend whispered, worried at the startled look on the white haired man's face. He knew that Corena openly allowed men to marry men and women, but no one had even hinted if this Prince had a preference for men. Tradition or no, they were asking this man to marry another man. "He will make a beautiful wife. He has been properly taught wifely duties, is capable of running your house until you take a first wife. He is obedient and submissive and I vow he is untouched. Not just by man, by woman as well since he was cloistered for the priesthood." Irend glanced behind the white haired Watcher to his brother but the brother seemed as uncertain of the lingering silence. "Before you say he is unacceptable, see his eyes."

Irend reached out and tapped on the glass, scolding Deseem from the distance. The sound made the boy startle a little. "I know he is skinny, he's been ill recently but he is much recovered." Deseem hadn't been eating, every meal, every bite had to be watched or he simply stared off into nothingness and refused it.

Black eyelashes fluttered and Irend tapped on the glass again. "See? He is already as modest as a wife should be."

They fluttered again and finally rose. The narrow chin lifted as well, just slightly and for a moment seemed to see inside, seemed to lock onto Liam's own eyes and his heart stopped. The boy was beautiful, and more man than boy, in truth, which had been one of his worries. There was nothing disagreeable with his appearance until he raised his eyes and looked right at him. Golden amber, a shade as unique as Liam's hair, a shade he'd only ever seen once, when he'd been more mad than sane with pain and grief. Amber eyes flickered up and around a little, studying the window and the wall it was set in, unable to bear the reflected sunlight any longer and Liam thought he might faint.

"Stunning are they not? You find him acceptable?"

Liam nodded. "He's acceptable."

Both Lach and Irend let out a soft breath. "Good. My Bentan brother is as my sister and shall be your wife."

Liam nodded and stepped back clumsily. He didn't wait for Lach, didn't wait for any further formalities, just hurried from the room seeking a private place to become ill.

"Liam..." Jas had knocked but Liam had ignored her. She knew he was in there and risked being yelled at or worse by cracking his room door open.

"Go away, Jas, I don't want to talk."

"I'm going to come in, you don't have to talk but I don't think you should be alone."

He rubbed at his eyes and rolled from his bed to sit up, not caring if his hair and uniform were rumpled. "Lach send you?"

"No." She slipped into the room and shut the door tight behind her. "I just thought you shouldn't be alone."

"You knew? Everyone knew before me."

"No, we suspected, what with the gossip and the order of a medical report but no one outside your family knew. Even the full treaty has been kept from the senate, to keep people from knowing." She carefully came into the room and folded down into one of the empty chairs. Liam was a swirl of knotted emotions and so tightly compressed, she found herself holding her breath for fear a too heavy or deep one would snap him. Carefully she focused her magic and tried to soothe some of the chaos inside of him.

Baxter slinked over, shy for such a large dog, and placed his head on her knee. She smiled at him and petted the big head. Liam didn't acknowledge her and sat on the edge of his bed, elbows on his knees and hands laced behind the back of his neck. She worked carefully on him, he'd proven unusually sensitive to Soulhealing and a too heavy touch would draw his notice and undo all the work she'd done. Eventually he stood and crossed the modestly sized room and gathered up the battered teapot and filled it was dried leaves and water. By the time he clicked small cups on the narrow table between his chairs, the water in the pot was steaming and hot.

"I always forget you can do that so easily. Must be handy in the winter."

He shrugged and poured out the fragrant dark brew. "Have you seen this Bentan?" He put the pot carefully down near the small charcoal stove, that heated the room in the winter, before he took his own chair.

"No, no one has."

"He hasn't even seen a Healer?"

"No, not one of ours."

Liam took the cup between his hands, more for the warmth than the tea. "He has amber gold eyes, Jas."

"No..."

He nodded. "I've never told anyone about that, only you, so there's no way they could have faked that to gain my trust. Besides, I don't think Irendorialah could have faked his surprise at seeing me or his hatred when he knew I was the Elemental that did so much harm. Shit Jas, how much can they ask of me? I can't do this, I can't...I...I just can't..." He knew he was close to a panic attack, the second one of the afternoon, and he knew he was dancing on the edge instead of falling over because of Jas.

"There you go, try to breathe." Jas spoke softly.

"I'm okay, thank you." He had gotten his breathing settled enough that he was able to take a sip of the cooling tea. "I have to do this. I figured that boy was a member of the court from how he was dressed but Restonarinach's son? Why would he... why would he help us? I would have ripped his throat out with my teeth if I'd been able to, simply because he was Bastion."

"If he is the one that freed you, does it make this marriage easier or more difficult?"

"It makes it more complicated." He forced a small smile. "Lady bless, Jas, he's beautiful too. I didn't remember him looking so...so..."

"Pretty?"

"No, he doesn't look pretty like a woman, but he's beautiful, a beautiful man. He's going to be stunning when he finishes maturing. Maybe I should have married Celeste and Malcome should have gotten this boy because it's cruel. Malcome wouldn't be tempted by his looks for a heartbeat." Liam slumped down into his chair.

"You are attracted to him."

"I'd be dead not to be, but he's still Bastion."

"One change I've noticed with you, you don't seem to so blindly hate Bastion."

"I don't, you were right, I was hating them to avoid feeling the hate I have for myself, but I don't trust them. I doubt I'll ever trust them." He finished his tea. "I've wondered what happened to that boy. Was he punished, murdered, because he'd helped us. I wouldn't have survived. Who knows how long Dorena would have lingered, suffered. It comforted her to die free, to know I would live. I owe that boy that. It's a debt I never thought I'd be able to repay. I wish a couple of months to deal with this. I think I can be fair to that boy, I think I can try to be. Jas I'm a horrible husband."

"No you're not, you were a very good husband."

"Not anymore I'm not. I never wanted to marry again. Think I can get the senate to stall for a few months?"

"Wish you could, dear, but it's all over already. The wedding is in five days."

That made him sit up. "Five days?"

"Bastion law. Treaty and marriage must be complete within six days of acceptance of the bride. Generally it's finalized in three, but the Senate needs the full treaty to kick about yet. Not that any of them will refuse it."

"Five days..."

"Does it change anything? You still will be right where you are in a few months, not wanting to do this and knowing you have to. At least now, you'll have it over with."

"There's too much to do. I can't stay here and be married, the room is too small. I'll have to move and..." He stopped his mind as it spun away. "I'm not going to worry about that."

"Good." She smiled. "Time with the Fishers has been good for you. Don't worry about the little things right now. You'll have to be in a room in the palace to begin with anyway, figure it out from there."

"I don't want a wife. I bet he's stupid, people that beautiful have to be stupid. I won't even be able to have a conversation with him. Gods, Norlan is going to find this horribly amusing. I have to get north, get his blessing. He should be here. There's no time to send for him." It was Northern Clan tradition in a multiple partner marriage that was broken by death, that the surviving partners sought permission from each other to remarry. It was more important if there were children involved and permission was never refused but the tradition stood.

"I'm sure he'll understand and you can follow court north this summer. You're actually much calmer than I expected you to be."

"What will shouting do? It'll just give me a headache and make staying in control more difficult. Just scare people even more..." He sighed and brushed hair back from his face. "I'm tired, Jas, I'm just so tired."

"Well..." It wasn't all physical though, according to his medical report he was dangerously worn thin. A lot of his exhaustion was emotional. He'd barely given himself time to heal in body and no time to heal in spirit before demanding he be sent out on patrol. "Think of it this way, you'll have a couple of weeks off for your honeymoon."

"I'll contain my excitement."

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Snowflakes and Embers

Chapter Eleven

"I do not enjoy the role of diplomat." Irend growled as he let the servants shut the door to their suite of rooms behind him. He wanted to slam it but he wasn't allowed to, even here so far from home. As custom required, he had his own set of rooms, his wife had her own and Deseem was cloistered in another. He'd been requiring them all to gather for the evening meal, mostly to make sure Deseem was eating something.

Just because he wanted them to eat together didn't mean they were seated at the same table. Deseem was placed at his own small table to the side of the one Irend and Barelen shared.

There were no low tables for them for the first weeks after their arrival, but one day he'd returned and somehow Barelen had managed to get their dining room laid out very close to a Bastion style.

It was soothing to return to their rooms after spending most of the day dealing with people that set his teeth on edge to find low tables, brightly colored fabric draped over the plain walls, scented incense in the air and cushions placed about. Barelen was always seated modestly to his left side and Deseem always sat, quietly, eyes down, at his own small table. Servants stood near by, all eunuchs since they had to serve both his wife and his Bentan brother. Sister, he corrected himself, Deseem was now promised, he was now his sister.

"Husband." Barelen said softly in greeting.

"Brother." Deseem echoed, barely above a whisper.

It pained him to hear the soft greeting. "Now they will spend the next two days debating the treaty in their Senate. Is this a kingdom or not? The crown should declare it so and that is how it should be. They drive me to madness."

"Will they refuse the treaty?" Barelen asked carefully. It had taken years to really understand that Irend didn't mind her asking questions without being included beforehand.

"I'm told not, that this is just their way but it makes me itch to act." He sighed and sat down. "I'm too much the warrior for this nonsense. It unnerves me to greet as allies men I've fought as enemies. More so to link my house with theirs." His eyes settled on where Deseem sat, as still as a carved statue. "Would you like to hear of your husband, littlest sister?"

Deseem sat silent for a long moment, hands clenched together, before he spoke. "If it would please you to tell me." The slur to his words was gone and outwardly everything seemed healed and recovered from his previous near miss with marriage but inside Deseem still felt shattered, vulnerable and scarred over.

"He's a warrior, he gave us no end of trouble during the war. The youngest son of the royal line, only a handful of years older than you. He..." Irend had to swallow his hatred of the source of so much death on the field of battle. "He is a man of dignity, or as much dignity as these people have. I believe he will treat his wife with honor."

"Brother?"

"Ask."

He wasn't sure he could, wasn't sure he wanted to know. "Will I be cleansed?" The thought alone made him shake.

There was hatred enough for present wounds that Irend didn't need to linger on old ones. What their father had done to both his sisters was worthy of hatred. "They have not asked and I am not inclined to suggest it. So long as you cause your husband no trouble, I doubt he will see a need."

The brother he had known would have crumbled under the relief. The sister sitting at the small table away from the main one drew a few deep, gasping breaths but otherwise didn't react, didn't even glance up.

"Thank you." Deseem ached to feel so grateful but he was and he couldn't help it.

All three went silent as food was placed around the tables, Bastion recipes adapted with Corena ingredients. It wasn't like at home but it was close. "Eat, littlest sister, you're to be a bride and wife in a few days. Won't do to have you pass out at your wedding."

"Irend..." Barelen spoke gently.

"What?" He glanced from his wife to Deseem and back. "He...she..." He caught himself. "She needs to eat. If she is too sickly, they may reject her or worse require more from us in the treaty to accept an ill bride. Neither of which we can afford."

Deseem tried to do as he was told, taking a tiny bite of his dinner but his stomach clenched painfully around it and he choked a little on it.

"The Healer says there is nothing wrong for you not to be eating littlest sister."

He struggled not to vomit up the small bite of food but every feminine pronoun, every time the word sister was used in connection to him, made him feel sicker. He struggled with the need to scream and strip naked to flaunt his lack of feminine breasts and curves and obvious male genitals. It was something he'd have to get used to, in a few days time he'd be wed and thought of as a woman and wife for the rest of his life.

"Irend..." Barelen tried again.

"What?"

"Be gentle, she's to wed in a few days. I didn't eat for two days before we wed and I spent four weeping. Your littlest sister is a good child; she will eat as she can, simply to please you."

Irend snorted a little and didn't want to take his worry and anger out on Deseem. The most difficult part of this treaty was falling to her shoulders as it was without him adding to her burden. "Is this so, sister? You'll eat as much as you can?"

"Yes, brother." Deseem whispered, eyes still down. He hated himself but he forced another bite into his stomach.

Lach wasn't surprised to find the floor Liam's room was on far more active than normal but he was surprised to find his brother's door open. Baxter was curled up on Liam's bed, a rare treat and it was mostly to get the big dog out of the way. Liam was standing on a low stool with two royal tailors and assistant hovering around him, filling the room's small space. To make matters worse, one of the palace directors of protocol was hovering to one side, a folder filled with papers in one hand and a pencil in the other.

"Oh Lady Bless, tell me Lach, you've orders that I'm needed a couple of hundred miles from here?" Liam called out and tried to ignore the tailors fussing.

"Sorry to disappoint but no."

"Can't blame me for trying. What brings you here other than to watch me be made into a pincushion?"

"Senate's back with a vote."

Liam felt his heart jump a beat. "And?"

"They approved the treaty." A look almost like pain and tempered with resignation crossed Liam's face before it was shut down and locked away.

"So be it. It's a good treaty."

"You've read it?"

"In Bastion and Trade, haven't been getting much sleep these last couple of days. It's fair, it'll be good for both our peoples. Are you staying or did you just come by to deliver the news?"

"I can stay if there's room for me."

"Push Baxter back and take the bed. Shove him a bit, he'll move." It was odd, he expected to feel trapped or angry at the official word that the wedding was going to take place but all he felt was resolved and numb. Even watching Lach trying to physically move Baxter back from hogging the whole bed did little to amuse him. "I was hearing the order for the ceremony."

"Ceremonies." The director corrected.

"Ceremonies, we're to have two, one in the Corena tradition and one in the Bastion."

"Speaking of which, Your Majesty, we were discussing the version of the service you'd prefer?"

"I don't care, whichever is the shortest. I don't want to be standing around forever listening to some priest blathering about love and commitment and building a life together."

"Or worse, going on about the evils of politics like the fellow Bekka picked for our service. I thought mother would do something vile to him afterwards." Lach added, claiming the front half of the rumpled bed by scratching the dog's ears.

"Very well." The man scribbled a little on his papers before looking up again. "And rings? Do you have a preference to styles?"

"No."

"And for your husband? Bastion law will view him as your bride, will you wish a ring more masculine or feminine?"

Liam looked to his brother but Lach didn't seem willing to let him off the hook. "I don't give a damn what Bastion law says, that boy is a still a man no matter who he weds."

"Anything you'd care to have engraved inside the rings?"

Lach could see Liam's frustration level rising and it really wasn't the poor directors fault. "How about 'pleased to meet you'?" That earned him a small, tight smirk.

"Nothing engraved."

"Very well. How aware are you of Bastion marriage customs?"

"This will be my first introduction to them." Liam answered dryly.

"Would you care for the long or short explanation?"

Lach cleared his throat. "I think the short will do."

"Very well."

Liam swore to himself if the man said that phrase once more he'd use the tailors pins to kill him.

"Our service will be first, but by Bastion custom you shall not be wed until their ceremony is

complete. The...bride... is dressed in a ritual garb of six layers of silk, the outermost layer is a long wrap like garment and the innermost is a dress of red silk that shall be sewn tightly to her...his....the bride's body. This limits the bride's movement to almost nothing. Additionally, the bride will be fully veiled with red silk, the range of vision is a small space about at the place of her...his...toes."

"So he's going to be unable to move and blind, no worries about him running away from you Liam."

"The bride will be wearing sandals which they are to step out of. The male relation giving the bride away takes the sandals and leaves the bride barefoot."

"Blind, unable to walk and barefoot, great custom." Lach teased but Liam wasn't even smirking now.

"The male relation will hand you the end of a length of red silk, the other end of which will be attached to the bride's garments. You must take it and lead the bride around a fire six times, symbolizing the uncoiling of her life from her father's house and the winding of her life to your house. At each rotation, the male relation will give you a token. Each token symbolizes a responsibility or duty of you as husband or of your house's to the bride's. They aren't flat tokens, some are fabric, some are paper or stone, and one is a chalice. You must not drop these or allow your bride to stumble into the fire."

"It's bad luck to burn the bride." That got him a small smile again and a quirked eyebrow. "And no, it won't get you out of this wedding."

The director cleared his throat softly. "Once around the fire six times, a member of your house can take the tokens from you."

"Father or...?"

"Me!" Lach grinned. "I'm going to act as your second. Bekka has offered to stand with your bride but he's not allowed to have anyone touch him but a eunuch until after he's wed, so no helping get him ready for the wedding."

"It was kind of her to offer and thank you."

"Welcome."

"Once around the fire, are we married?"

"Not quite, the male relation takes a knife and a piece of red silk, uses the silk to take the bride's hand so he isn't touching her, and makes a v shaped cut on the right hand just below the index finger. A few drops of blood are gathered into a small cup and mixed with a swallow of wine. You must drink this in one swallow. It's the bride's family's blood mingling with your own."

"Will I need to be cut as well?"

"No, just the bride. Once you've finished the swallow, you hand the cup back to prove you drank it and the male relation hands you a small bowl with a red powder. You must take the bride's hand and rub a generous pinch of the powder into the cut. It'll stop the bleeding and cause the mark to heal with a red tint. You are technically officially married by Bastion law when you finish the swallow of wine but you must rub in the powder and then offer the bride a new pair of shoes. There's some things that must be said and such but not by you or the bride and so you don't need to worry about that."

"Sounds like a quick ceremony."

"It should be."

"And after?"

"The bride must stay veiled, you'll be escorted to a side room to wait while everyone is seated for the feast. At the feast, by Bastion law, you and your bride are seated away from everyone else and expected not to be disturbed. You will have a plate of gold in front of you and the bride has a red plate."

"Real gold?" Lach asked, surprised because even though they were royalty, their parents had gone to great lengths to raise them strictly.

"Real gold. For Bastion citizens of lower birth, it's a plate with a gold color but for the rank of both bride and groom, anything less than real gold would be a mockery."

"We wouldn't want this to be a mockery." Liam muttered and winced as another pin poked him.

"At the feast, the husband is brought food but not the wife. All she is allowed to eat is what food the husband cuts from his own meal and places on her plate. She must be fed one bite at a time, offered from your plate to her's and she will pick it up with her fingers and raise it under the veil. The same goes for drink, she will have a small cup and you must fill it one swallow at a time. It symbolizes her complete dependence upon her husband."

"He's a boy you know."

"Excuse me, Your Majesty?"

"The bride, he's Bentan, that means he is a man. Not a she, you keep saying she and her."

"Oh, forgive me, all of the notes we've been given are written that way."

Liam sighed and turned as the tailors directed him. "What else?"

"Once the meal is over, there is the traditional ball."

"Not much fun for this Bentan; blind, unable to move, and under fed and then dumped in a room full of people." Lach sighed now too and wondered how badly this was going to turn out.

"We've arranged for the bride and groom to be removed fairly quickly, after the fourth song. Any sooner and...well..." the director cleared his throat again and glanced to his papers.

"Any sooner and folks will think lewd thoughts." Lach laughed. "Bekka dragged us out before the end of the third, people teased us for weeks but one of the stays in her corset had torn loose. It had been digging into her ribs for hours, actually cut her skin by the time we...ah...got it off her." He couldn't help but grin in a silly way. Malcome called it his besotted love sick fool look.

"Fourth song, got it. Will someone make sure...make sure my" He sighed and couldn't bring himself to call another man his bride but knew it was against custom to call him husband and not comfortable with using the boy's name. "Will someone inform the Bastion party of the chairs?"

"It's already been done."

"We should skip it, it's not fair to ask someone unable to take a full step and fully veiled to be dropped into a chair and carried to the bedchamber."

"There's going to be too many Watchers and cousins at the ball to stop them, Liam. You know

how much fun it is and no one ever gets dropped.” Lach would have agreed but there was no way to stop everyone and it was custom.

Liam shook his head. “What else?”

“Ah... well... a suite has been set aside and is being properly accorded for the wedding night. According to Bastion custom, the bride is unable and simply isn’t allowed to remove a single garment of the bridal attire on her...his...own. And since the final dress is stitched on the body, Your Majesty will need to...to... rip the seams.”

“Wonderful.”

“It’s Bastion custom. It was explained as a ritual means of a husband to claim his bride and a symbol of the...the...rending of her...her...virginity.”

Lach about busted a gut trying not to laugh. He wasn’t sure who was more uncomfortable, the director or Liam himself.

“Thank you, I understood. Anything further I should know?”

“Only a small side note, the bride is sewn into her wedding dress.”

“His.” This time Lach corrected the man.

“His. Which means from before the ceremony until...until...the removal of the dress....the bride is unable to... well... to...visit the privy...or take a full breath...or much of anything. It’s noted since you are not a Bastion husband and may not be aware of the discomfort the bridal attire can cause.” He cleared his throat again and seemed to find his papers very fascinating.

“I’ll keep it in mind.”

“Is there anything you would request in particular for the wedding chamber?” The director asked without glancing up.

“I...” Liam looked to his brother. “I don’t know, I didn’t have a say in any of the arrangements before.”

“Bekka requested a live chicken, four peacock feathers, eleven truffles and a snapping turtle.” Lach answered with a straight face.

Liam was glad he wasn’t the only one staring at his brother like he was insane, the tailors and director were too. “Whatever for?” He tried to think of all the things he’d done in his life and none of them would even remotely require any of the items on the list, except maybe the candy.

He shrugged. “They asked, she wanted to see if they would actually do it. So when we were carried to the room and there was a live chicken in a small cage, four peacock feathers on the bed, none the less, eleven truffles on a silver plate and small enclosure with a box turtle in it and a note saying a snapping one couldn’t be found and they hoped this would work in its stead. She about keeled over laughing, sent it all away but kept the truffles.” He grinned. “Well and the feathers.”

“Oh Gods stop the story there, I do not need to hear further!” Liam did laugh a little now. “I won’t be requiring poultry. Will... will his belongings be moved?”

“To the wedding suite, yes, sir.”

“And mine?”

"A good sum of them, yes sir."

He sighed. "I don't know anything about him, what would maybe make him feel more at home so far from his home. Just, see to it that the room is comfortable."

"Very well sir."

"Ow." He flinched away from a bad stick but the tailor just tsked.

"Well, if you hadn't lost so much weight since you wore your court formal uniform you wouldn't need it tailored." Lach teased.

"Hey, I'm a good four inches taller too, in case you hadn't noticed and I haven't lost that much weight." The tailor was the only one bold enough to tsk again at his obvious lie.

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Chapter Twelve

"This is stupid." Liam wanted to whine but the words came out cold and flat, a full truth statement that he tried to hide behind.

"You won't let me take you into the city or throw a party and I'm not letting you spend the night before your wedding alone. Besides, the servants have too much to do already and having to wait until you're out of your room tomorrow to start moving you is unfair. You're spending the night with us, end of story. We're going to drink and play cards."

"Lach... it's okay." Traditionally before a wedding, both sides gathered with friends and family for drinking and celebration. Liam would rather have skipped that part and been alone. The few friends he'd had while a trainee had been killed, one by one, in the line of duty and the better part of his family were quite frightened of him.

"No it's not okay, you're coming over, end of story. Consider it an order."

He hung his head for a second, more to hide how quietly grateful he was than anything else. He really didn't want to be alone but it seemed easier. "Alright, I'll be over."

"And no brooding! Finish up what you need to and come over for dinner."

"Alright already. Can you take Baxter early? I want to go for a walk, stop by the temple?"

"And then you'll come over?"

"Yes, now get out of here." He patted Baxter's side. "You too boy, come on." He stood still as dog and brother both reluctantly left and stood in his silent room, alone. Servants and officials and a whirlwind of people had been coming and going at a frantic pace for days and now, all was silent. It was a little odd to be dropped back to what his life had been. There really was nothing left for him to do. All he had left to do, was show up and promise to take care of another human for the rest of his life without knowing a thing about that person.

He'd lied, he didn't want a walk but he did want to visit the temple. Not the new, large and impressive one in the city, but the old one. The one that had stood before Corena the first arrived in the valley, before the Watchers, then a mercenary group had settled in the valley. The temple that legend said was the oldest building in the world but how that was possible Liam didn't know but the stones did hum with age and power.

Out of respect to the old temple, it sat at the edge of the forest with no buildings near by to cast a shadow onto it. This was where Watchers were mourned, no matter where they fell or were buried. It was where the royal family came when burden with difficult choices and yet no worship occurred inside the old stone walls. The only God called upon was the Queen of Death, patron to the kingdom and the Watchers, and the only being to never ask to be worshiped, the only one unmoved by prayers.

"Watcher Liam." A priestess greeted him, standing inside the door as if she'd been waiting for him.

"Priestess." Which she may have been doing just that, the priestesses of Lady Death always seemed more aware. Whether it was a keen eye for politics or knowledge from a higher connection, he didn't know and didn't question. He did know service to the Death Queen in her order was as much of a calling as becoming a Watcher.

"Please." She motioned to a hallway and led him down it.

He liked this temple with its more narrow hallways and old stones. It felt rooted, felt sheltered and a million miles from the world outside. There were few windows and the light was always dim and soothing. Nothing was shiny and reflective enough to see yourself in. There was always a faint scent of flowers and polish and dust and the muted, soft sounds of life not hurried and time spent outside the rush of the outside world.

The main mediation room was large, able to seat several hundred on long, plain wood benches with low backs. The wood was worn smooth from centuries of hands and too many funerals and farewells. Liam had distant memories of his Grandmother's funeral and how the family had gathered privately here to mourn before the state funeral. He remembered the feel of the smooth wood below his hands and seeing his father weep for the first time. When his sister had been killed, he'd been on the border and there had been only an hour to pause and grieve. When his wife had died, he'd been holding her in his arms and once back home felt no need for further goodbyes.

He didn't want the main room, open and exposed and the priestess already knew that. She lead him instead to one of the dozens of smaller rooms, some barely large enough for two people, some able to hold a few dozen and he was grateful the one offered him was small, one of the smallest. The close space felt like an embrace, felt sheltering and held safe.

Normally the priestess knew to stay or leave but this time she hovered uncertain. "Would you care for council?"

Liam just raised his eyebrows surprised.

It earned him a quick smile. "My Lady has not insisted I stay but suggested I should."

"I..." He glanced away and around the small plain room in rich dark wood and its warm golden light. "What can you say that I don't already know? Everyone is worried about my being alone but I think I'd like to be, at least for now."

She bowed her head slightly. "Very well, you'll call for one of us if you change your mind."

"I will, thank you." He stood until she retreated and only when he was alone did he slide onto the low bench. He'd often wondered if the benches were made to be just the slightest bit uncomfortable, after a time, they caused muscles to cramp up and backs to hurt and it was a subtle reminder to leave and return to life and living.

It didn't matter, he wasn't planning on staying too long. He wanted to ask Dorena to understand but he knew she would and did. She'd not wanted him or Norlan to grieve so long and wouldn't have ever wanted them to never love again but this was different. It wasn't about love but duty and he knew she'd understand that too. They'd wed out of duty and she must have had reservations about wedding a boy ten years her junior but she'd never let him know that. Norlan, she'd wed for love and he'd been blessed to have been allowed to share their love and welcomed into their lives.

There was no hope of finding that this time. He was, quite literally, marrying the enemy and while he knew none of them could afford such thinking once the treaty was signed. He also knew he didn't love, or hate, easily. Death hadn't made him stop loving Dorena and this marriage wouldn't make him stop hating Bastion.

"I won't take it out on this boy." He promised. "I owe him your freedom and my life. I won't hate him simply because of where he was born and who his father is." That was a difficult promise to make but he believed he could do it. "It's just not fair, two treaty marriages? It's too much to ask. At least I got to meet you before we wed." He whispered into the silence.

Then the thought struck him of what it must be like for his bride. A boy raised to be a priest, suddenly told he's to take on the life of a woman and become some man's wife. Worse, he was taken from his home and people, miles and miles from his culture and ways and told he was going to wed a man from a country that had, up until a few years ago, been actively trying to kill his people. On top of that, to know that his brother and family would leave and return home, leaving him behind in his new life and uncertain conditions must be ten times more frightening than Liam's own angst and fears.

Worse, what if the boy wasn't kree? What if the thought of being wed to a man was repulsive? Liam, at least, had bedded men and knew he enjoyed it. He would have little difficulties with marrying a man, if he had any desire at all to wed and happened to fall for another man. He could adapt and accept the natural thoughts people would assume about them but if the boy was more like Malcome and totally, completely not kree, how difficult to know everyone will assume certain things about their marriage.

None of which would be true as Liam had no plans of consummating their marriage, ever. It wouldn't be the first treaty marriage to have a cold marriage bed. After a few years when attention was no longer on them and maybe, if he was really, really lucky, and they'd figured out how to be friends, maybe then they could find lovers for physical comfort if not love.

Love, Liam didn't want to think about love. He'd cut that part of his heart out when Dorena had stopped breathing while he held her, shivering from infection and half mad himself from fever. He'd barely lived to reach their lines but when it became clear his wounds wouldn't kill him too, he knew he'd never love again.

That was a statement Dorena would have laughed at. A twenty-two year old man swearing to never love again was ridiculous but he meant it. If his logical mind knew it was a silly thought, his

heart screamed a different truth. If he loved again, in a decade or two or in his old age maybe, and his bride was still alive, there was nothing preventing him by Bastion law or Corena to taking a second wife. Bentan brides were almost always second wives to begin with, or third and were never wed as single wives in Bastion. In Corena, by their laws, multiple marriages were uncommon but not unheard of and in the Northern Clans with so many Shamans marrying between Clans to keep the peace, marriages of three or four people were common. Both parties in a peace marriage, one based on treaty, were almost expected to wed for love as well.

Again, the poor Bentan would not have that option. He could love another, and Liam had no problem with the idea of him bedding another, which was a radically different thought than a Bastion husband would have had over his Bentan, but the boy would never, legally, be able to marry another, even with Liam's permission and blessing. Bentans and brides did not have that right. So the boy was wedding him tomorrow and surrendering any hope of ever finding a relationship built on love.

It humbled Liam and made him a little ashamed of his own fears and pains. He was being put out, yes, and being asked to give up a great deal for peace, but this boy was giving up so much more. It wasn't even like Celeste when she'd arrived at court to meet and marry Malcome. Celeste had known of their ways, she'd married a man freely and had held the right to refuse, the same that Malcome had. She stayed in close contact with her family and had known she would be treated with respect and dignity. Liam believed that they had grown from friendship to respect to love in their marriage because Malcome was many bad things but he was a good man, an honorable one and he was not shy with how much he adored Celeste.

The boy sitting across the palace, knowing he was to be wed to a stranger he'd never even met before, had none of those comforts. He expected to be treated as a Bastion bride, with no rights or say, locked away for fear of another man even laying a lustful eye on him. He was expecting to surrender his very concept of his self and become a woman to a man that would literally, by Bastion custom, own him. And since he was in a temple and being honest he knew the boy must be sitting there knowing that within a day he'd be sold to his husband and the husband would take him, use his body as he willed, with no say or regard to the Bentan's desires or thoughts.

It must be blindingly terrifying. A far worse fear than simply giving up some freedom to ride patrol for a time and feeling like remarrying is a tarnish to a golden memory. Liam doubted he could do it, if their roles were reversed and if nothing else, without knowing a single thing about his soon to be bride, he respected the courage that it took.

That's what he would use to be fair to this boy. He'd respect the courage it took to fulfill the treaty and risk his very life and he'd try to use that as a buffer between his feelings for Bastion and the single citizen from Bastion being entrusted to him. If Dorena would forgive him and Norlan not be angry with him, he could face tomorrow with some dignity and cold resignation.

To reach that conclusion took just about the same amount of time it took for his back to start to hurt from the slightly uncomfortable benches and he found himself grinning a little. "I know, life goes on." He whispered and stood up. Liam quietly left the temple with no one stopping him to have a final word and walked a little more easily back to the palace grounds and his brother's suite of rooms.

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Chapter Thirteen

"Why look who showed up." Bekka grinned as she opened the door.

"I did promise." Liam muttered and stepped inside. The room wasn't empty, which he didn't expect. Lach was already at the table, cards dealt out and drinks poured but so was Jas and Jan dressed alike and so alike he had to actually really look to tell one sister from the other. Lach's secretary, Sam was there as well, which didn't surprise him, the man was one of Lach's best friends. What did surprise him was his father, sitting, out of uniform in one of the seats around the table and beside him, even more shockingly, was Malcome.

"What's going on?"

"Gods, Liam, for a couple of hours stop being a suspicious cuss and sit down." Malcome called out and poured a drink. "You wouldn't let Lach do anything nice for you, so shut up and play some cards."

He stood, stunned speechless by his family and for the first time, speechless in a good way. Bekka came over and placed a kiss on the side of his face. "You'll have to drink for me, I'm not allowed."

"I...thank you." He finally forced out and let them draw him in to take a seat at the table.

"Hey, Liam..."

Liam rolled over and pulled a pillow over his head. "Go...way..." He hadn't been sleeping well the last few days despite being exhausted but last night he'd fallen asleep easily and slept soundly.

"Can't go away... you have to get up."

"Don' wanna..."

"Liam." Lach poked a shoulder, hard. "You have to, you're getting married today."

Liam groaned and rolled over. He pried the pillow from his head and peered out blearily at his brother and Baxter's tongue lolling face. "Oh... I slept so well...."

White hair was tangled and spilled everywhere and Liam was half curled up. Sleep had dissolved the cynicism from his face and made him look younger than he actually was, which was still fairly young. Liam had grown up too fast because of what he could do. It was his magic and his magic alone that had sent him directly to the front at such a young age and that was a guilt Lach had trouble living with. He often wondered how their mother managed.

"Good, now get out of bed."

Liam groaned again. "Jas's doing...oh..." he pulled tangled strands of hair back from his face. "Thanks...for last night...I don't know how you managed to get father and Malcome to come over but it was nice." He yawned. "Almost...almost like a real family..."

"We are a real family, idiot, now get up." Lach clapped his hands and motioned a little and that was all the encouragement Baxter needed to jump onto the bed and stomp his master.

"Ow! Hey!" Liam tried to shove the animal away and all that did was get his face licked. "Stop it boy, stop...ugh."

Lach was still grinning as he left the guest room.

Liam struggled to get Baxter settled, the dog didn't like it when things were odd and people were acting oddly. As soon as he had Baxter moved to a position that wasn't hurting him Liam let the animal alone, petting his ears mindlessly. "I'm getting married." All the words did was make him feel tired and he groaned as he stretched again. "Might as well get this over with."

"This is unacceptable!" Irend nearly shouted and ignored the way Barelen held her hands up in a soothing gesture. "They will reject her if she passes out during the ceremony."

"She won't pass out at the ceremony."

"Of course she will! She hasn't kept solid food down in over a day and now is vomiting up tea."

"Please, husband, peace, please..." Barelen soothed.

Deseem actually half hoped he would pass out during the ceremony and be rejected. To save honor, Irend would need to renegotiate the treaty and that would delay the wedding. If the wedding was delayed maybe they'd change their minds entirely and he wouldn't have to do this. He knelt over the water privy and was gasping for breath, servants holding his hair as the latest round of nausea retreated.

Barelen glanced to where Deseem knelt, looking pale and her eyes held understanding. She knew what it was to be in the final hours before meeting her husband, even if Irend didn't. "The Healer will see to it she does not faint during the ceremony but husband, if I may, shouting will only make her nerves more frayed." She wanted to be by her Bentan sister-in-law, helping to hold back the 36 braids the servants were weaving as her sisters and sisters-in-law had helped her on her wedding day but Irend was standing by tradition and allowing no one, man or woman, to touch Deseem until after the wedding.

"We need this treaty, Deseem, do you understand how much is at stake? My life, the lives of my house, your Uncle's life, all hang on this treaty being accepted and that hangs on this marriage. Do you understand?" Irend pleaded.

It made Deseem want to vomit again but his stomach was empty. "I do, brother."

"Then try, try to be a little more cooperative!"

Deseem nodded and struggled not to shatter, he was trying but it wasn't enough. "I will, brother." He let the servants help him to rinse his mouth before they washed his face again and moved to finish the braids.

Thankfully, Barelen shooed Irend away and it left them alone in the room with just the servants.

They kept making ready, weaving the braids of his hair up onto his head in a traditional style, finishing the ends with small bells and bits of gold before they wove in what would be the base of the red and gold headpiece that would hold the veil out away from his face enough to see just in front of his feet.

Barelen placed a small cup in front of where he sat. "Water, not chilled, not hot. Sip it slowly, you must put something into your body or you will not make it." She smiled gently.

He couldn't bring himself to risk more than a sip. "Thank you, for your kindness these months."

"You are my sister. Only another woman can know what it is like on the day of her wedding, it's something a man can not understand."

Deseem nodded but it got him thinking. Maybe he really was a woman, if gender was more than physical form wouldn't this make him female now? Did it matter how he thought of himself when how others thought of him had permanently changed? It kept him thinking enough that he didn't become ill again and the servants got him slipped into the first layer of dress; the red silk one that they had to sew shut, the one that literally was so tight he couldn't walk or breathe and could barely sit in. It kept his mind busy enough that he didn't notice as they painted his face to give it a paler sheen with the dark black lines around his eyes.

"A moment?" Barelen asked as the servants began to slip slender gold bracelets over Deseem's hands and feet to rest against his ankles and wrists. It provided a flashing contrast to the dye they'd colored his fingers and toes with, dipped in the red tint to the middle joint and painted in bands around his wrists and ankles. The dye had replaced the rope once used to restrain unwilling brides until after they were wed. The servants nodded and moved aside but stayed in the room, silent chaperones to Deseem's untouched state.

She sighed at how silent and still Deseem sat and wondered where the composure came from. She'd wept the entire morning, had still been crying while being married and had burst into tears of fear when Irend had removed her veil. She had been a bride and Deseem was a Bentan so maybe some of the strength he had came from that, or maybe it was like her sister, who had sat glassy eyed and empty, almost lifeless until after her wedding. She'd wept then, to their mother, about the marriage bed and their mother had soothed her hair and told her she'd grow accustomed to it. Barelen had been lucky in that respect, Irend wasn't a brutal husband and she'd even learned to find pleasure while he found his own.

"Do not fight him." She finally said softly and wide, golden eyes raised to meet her own. "This Corena husband of yours, do not fight him and it will hurt less. You have been bathed and prepared?" It was their custom that a bride was bathed with scented oils and had her body hair removed by a Healer, a habit Barelen had continued because it pleased her husband. She waited until Deseem nodded slightly. "It is to make your skin softer for your husband's touch. Do not fight him, he will have you if you fight him or not and it will only cause more pain. My mother told me to think of the children I would be given to take the sting from the marriage bed but a Bentan will have no children. So, think of the peace you purchase. Think of the advantage you win for your brother's house with this treaty and maybe it will make this more tolerable."

Deseem felt panic well up in him and he struggled to breathe. The red silk dress was too tight and he couldn't catch his breath. For long moments he feared he'd pass out but the idea of being yelled at by Irend again, of being an even bigger disappointment was more than he could bare and he forced himself to not feel the fear and to try to slow his breathing.

"I..." he dared to ask. "I know nothing of what to expect."

It wasn't her place to tell him and in truth she wasn't entirely sure what a husband did with a Bentan. She'd wondered, thought about it but hadn't asked Irend. She could guess, most of the things Irend asked of her a Bentan could perform and from some of the stories from her sisters,

things that Irend didn't ask of her a Bentan could perform but she didn't know.

"That is for your husband to show you. If you can, close your eyes and pretend you are somewhere else, it helps and remember he is your husband. Be grateful he has not had you cleansed or altered as the eunuchs as some husbands require of their Bentans."

That was a small comfort. Deseem tried to imagine a worse pain than having his mind burned out for hours and couldn't conceive of it. His father had declared him Bentan, he would be married, that was the will of God and he had accepted that. At least, in exchange for being married to a foreigner, he would be allowed his mind. That was more than he had expected or hoped for and it was a small measure of gratitude he could feel.

"Now, if you are up to it, the Queen who is soon to be your mother, wishes a word with you. Let the servants finish dressing you so that she may have her word."

He nodded, too sick with fear to speak and wishing he could skip the day and the night it would bring and find himself already past it. Deseem stood as he was directed and let the final five layers of dresses, each one smaller, shorter and thinner than the one below it, be woven around his body. It was beautiful, he could admit that but it just made him feel smothered. It didn't take long and as they were attaching the headpiece to his woven hair, the room's door opened and a stern looking woman walked in.

She was tall for a woman but Deseem was taller even in his bare feet. She was dressed all in black, in pants which was shocking to see and in the uniform of a Watcher, a silver mask pendent at her throat. There were lines on her face, a face that might have once been pretty but he was guessing bordered on plain. Her faded reddish blonde hair was going white and was pulled up in a simple style on the top of her head. Beyond the slender gold band around her forehead, that Deseem took to be a crown, nothing about her dress or appearance gave away her rank but for a slender woman she filled the room with her presence.

So much so that it took Deseem a moment to see the man following beside her. Dressed in a black uniform as well but with black hair and dark brown eyes with the dusky tan skin of Bastion, it made Deseem wonder how many of these people were actually in Corena and as the man moved he saw the silver mask at his throat. So there were Bastion in the ranks of Watcher, which was something he didn't know.

"I bet you speak Trade about as well as I speak Bastion." The Queen asked but the golden eyes watching her showed no signs of understanding.

The man in black looked to Deseem and to the Queen. "She wishes to know if you speak Trade or understand it?"

Deseem shook his head a little, bells in his hair and bangles on his wrists chimed as he moved. The queen spoke again but the words made little sense to him and he began to wonder how he'd manage to please his new family when he couldn't understand them.

"She says, it's her tradition to speak to those who would marry her children before the wedding, to point out the difficulties in wedding a member of the royal family and a Watcher." He paused and the woman continued. "But she doubts it's words you will hear right now." Again he paused and listened. "She says, her son is stubborn and strong willed and not easy to live with but honorable."

"Tell him he's welcome in my family as the husband to my son and will be treated with respect. And use the masculine term and not Bentan."

"I... My Queen... I can't, there is no word in Bastion for a masculine spouse married to another man."

Deseem tried not to frown as the pair spoke in sharp quick words back and forth, worried that maybe he'd done something wrong without knowing it.

The man sighed and shook his head. "She wishes you to know that you will be welcomed into her family and treated with respect as...as...the masculine wife to her son."

The awkward phrasing made Deseem uncomfortable and uncertain but some reply seemed to be expected. He had to swallow twice to get his voice to work. "Thank you, Your Majesty, my only hope is to be a good wife and bring peace between our people."

Relina listened to the translated answer and smiled softly. "Lady, it's almost a good thing they can't have children, isn't it Bishick? Their children would be improperly pretty. Don't tell him that, it wasn't fair to say. Tell him I'll see him after the ceremonies." She waited and watched the golden eyes as the boy listened. It wasn't fair maybe, to know that Liam did have an interest in men when her son hadn't directly spoken to her about it but it did make her feel less guilty to ask this of him. At least it wouldn't be too awkward for him and at least the boy was attractive.

She waited until the boy bowed a little but his face stayed worried and serious, almost frightened, before she turned and left. She spoke polite political words to Irend and his silent wife, veiled as always but she'd guessed that was because of their arrival, and quickly left the suite.

"Bishick?"

"Yes, my Queen?"

"Give it a week or so, maybe a bit longer but it would be a kindness to help that boy learn Trade. Liam is good at many a-things but his tolerance for teaching a language is limited."

He smiled. "Of course, I'll have to speak to Watcher Liam first. A Bentan bride won't even speak to a strange male without their husband's permission."

"Good. Bad enough I'm getting a timid mouse for a son-in-law, at least speaking Trade will give the poor mouse a fighting chance in this family of hawks."

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Chapter Fourteen

"Peace woman, stop fussing!" Lach laughed and pushed Bekka's hands away from where she was flicking lint too small to be seen away. He was used to her nervous fussing but he was worried if she turned her busy hands on Liam, that his brother would snap.

"Alright, fine, look a mess."

"We look fine." More than fine in court formals, the uniform made anyone look strong and dashing and Liam with his loose, long white hair was stunning. "Go on now, before Celeste sends someone looking for you."

"Fine." She leaned up and put a kiss softly to his lips and then turned to say something to Liam but changed her mind when she saw him standing, eyes empty and blank and figured it was better not to disturb him. "Keep an eye on him..." She whispered to Lach as she left the room.

Out in the hall, ranks and names were being announced as Court was called to order and the time was drawing closer. Liam stumbled backwards. "I can't do this, I can't."

"Liam..." Lach tried to sound soothing but the sheer raw look of panic in his brother's blue eyes scared him.

"No... no... I can't breathe...this is a mistake....I can't do this again...I can't..."

"Liam..."

"No! No...it's not fair, I can't..."

Lach stepped away to get a guard to send for Jas and give the order to delay a little bit while they calmed Liam back down but before he could get to the door Malcome stood up. Their oldest brother had been friendly but watchful the night before and cold and silent today and Lach almost warned him to stay away, fearing the bad blood and buried resentment between the two would be a catalyst to a breakdown Jas couldn't fix in a few moments time.

"You're right." Malcome said softly, standing in Liam's direct line of sight but back several feet. His eyes lowered down to the floor and the toes of their well polished boots. "It's not fair. It is asking too much. If I'd lost Celeste the way you lost Dorena?" He swallowed hard and shook his head. "There's nothing in all the Death Queen's hells that could make me step out there and do this. I couldn't but I know you can."

"I..."

"You aren't a coward, Liam."

"I...I'm okay..." He was gulping for air but the shakes were passing. "I'm okay."

Malcome glanced up and quirked a half smile. "Well, as okay as you get anyway."

It was odd to hear them introduced with their full titles. Liam was never introduced formally like that, even when he attended court. It reminded him he wasn't doing this for any small reason, he was a royal prince, His Royal Majesty, Watcher-Prince Liam Corena, Duke of Lars Down and he was doing this to secure a treaty. It's what he had to do, it's what a prince did. He wasn't a person, he was a commodity belonging to the state.

He distantly heard his brother's names and titles called but it was faded and hidden behind the sound of blood rushing, his heart beating fast and hard. Lach nudged him a little and Liam unfroze at the touch and found his feet were willing to move. He only hoped his face didn't look as terrified as he felt but as he stepped out from the side room and saw so many faces he knew the fear had to be in his eyes.

"It's okay." Lach whispered but it didn't feel okay.

Liam caught sight of Jas and Jan in the front and at their careful smiles of encouragement he felt

he could at least breathe. That bought him some room in his panic to look around and standing to the side of the center of the slightly raised dais the thrones sat on was Prince Irend. Behind him stood his veiled wife and various members of his party, all dressed in layers of lightweight cloth in bright colors and heavy with gold thread embroidery.

It would have been impossible to miss his bride. The figure stood behind Irend, several paces ahead of the rest of the party and was entirely covered in fabrics. Layers and layers of fabric, all in shades of red, yellow, pink, orange, bright like fire and flame and glinting with gold in the late afternoon sunlight. Red fabric, thick and heavy silk covered the forms head down to below the shoulders and stood out mostly because the veil was the least decorated and embroidered fabric on the bride's entire body. A single length of red silk was tied to the bride's wrist and Irend held the other end, a binding leash to guide the bride to be married.

That was his bride, his spouse, the person he'd have to respect and work with for the rest of their lives. He could do that, especially if the boy really had been the one to free them, to give Dorena some dignity before she died. He tried to think about how much more frightening this was for the boy, blind under his veil, led around like Baxter would be. He could be respectful to him, and one better, he could hold himself together and deal with what this would mean later, in private.

He drew a breath and glanced up to where his parents sat in a dress uniform a step more elaborate than his own court formal uniform, his mother in a dress version, the skirt full and wide around her. It was one of the few times he'd ever seen her in a skirt and it made her look more regal and more born to rule than his father. On their heads were the oak and woodland crowns made at the time of the Restoration instead of the simple gold bands they normally wore.

It made Liam self conscious of the slender crown he had to wear with his court formal uniform, gold and flat, three bands woven together, it matched exactly the crown his brothers each wore. It was their way to be more understated but it made him uncomfortable to wear a crown, he'd happily never put one on again. It wasn't the first time he was grateful that he was youngest child, not eldest.

Korin stood and smiled warmly at the gathered crowd. "Thank you all for taking the time from your busy lives to join us here today for the marriage of our youngest son, Watcher Liam to the youngest child of King Restonarinach, the Guiding Star of Bastion, represented today by His Royal Majesty, the Second Son of the Guiding Star, Commander of the Crescent Guard, Lord of the Twelve Rivers, Prince Irendorialah. We not only welcome the expansion of our family but also gather to celebrate the signing of a treaty of trade and peace between our two peoples. Too long has blood been shed, may there be no more pain between our peoples."

Liam had often snuck into a side room as a child while his parents held court just to be able to listen to his father's voice boom out, deep and echoing. It filled the large room and he liked the way it sounded so rich and warm. He may have grown up but that voice soothed him as it washed over him. It reminded him of the last time he'd stood before his father's deep voice having his marriage announced.

"Our houses shall be joined, our families shall share a common peace and today we join these two lives together according to the customs, traditions and laws of both our lands."

Irend stood a little straighter and locked eyes only with Korin. "If it would please Your Majesty, we will begin with the traditions of your people."

"That's most gracious of you. Would those of the order of Jano please come forward?" He waved a hand slightly and three women, dressed in flowing robes with hair that had never been cut since they took their vows, stepped from the front rows of the crowd. On each woman, her hair reached nearly to the floor but the oldest, with more white than brown in her hair, hers actually dragged on the ground behind her. All three curtsied with perfect balance and skill to all the assembled royalty.

"It is our honor to serve." They rose as one and the oldest of the three continued to speak. "It is our custom for those to be wed to join hands but it is the custom of Bastion that the bride may not be touched by anyone, including the groom, until after they are joined. So, we've compromised." The eldest priestess accepted a carved, highly polished rosewood stick and balanced it on her fingers.

The two younger priestesses stepped forward, circled around where Liam and the red silk clad bride stood. He felt the soft touch of the priestess on his elbow, guiding him to step forward and saw from the corner of his eye how the other one took the red silk lead from Irend and led the slender figure forward in careful, slow steps. It let him at least see how small of a step the other man could take before he was expected to lead him around a fire.

Liam let the priestess place one end of the staff in his left hand and watched as the lead was used to lift the other man's left hand up. When the stick tapped on his hand, he reflexively took a hold of it and all at once they were connected. It surprised Liam, he could feel the wood, the care taken in its craftsmanship. More, he felt the way the wood settled in the other man's hand, felt the tiny vibrations his trembling gave to the staff. His magic twined with the staff and it felt like he really was holding the other man's hand.

The priestess wound a cord woven with black and white sections over the other man's wrist, down his hand and over the staff before wrapping it lightly up over Liam's hand and wrist. Tied to the cord with a slender black thread were two rings. Both were obviously masculine in style, wider and not delicate with a base of a pale white gold and worked into the center was the oak leaf and acorn pattern of the royal family but in rose, yellow and green gold. They were beautiful, well crafted and obviously had been made far in advance of the five day notice Liam had been given. They were certainly far more beautiful than the simple, plain rings Dorena had requested for their marriage.

The eldest priestess raised her hands and spoke a blessing on the crowd, she spoke a blessing on the promise of peace. Then she stood, her hands hovering over Liam's head and blessed him before she moved and did the same for the man beside him. Normally they laid their hands on their heads to bless them but they were trying not to touch either of them. One final blessing was said over the rings and binding cord wrapped around their hands before she stepped back.

"Cords and ties, oaths and vows, none of these can stand unbroken." She reached and the rings broke from their slender threads and slipped into her hands. "No promise, no binding can be stronger than two people willingly stepping forward and joining their lives together as one. If either of you do not come to this union with a willing open heart, if either of you hold fear or doubt, Jano requires you to step away and not go forward."

Liam prayed his worry and fear wouldn't show in his eyes. Priestesses of Jano had been known to refuse to wed a pair if one seemed unwilling. He hoped that they'd take the situation and circumstances into account because he was about as willing and accepting as he was ever likely to get. It was an unfair question anyway, because neither one of them had a real choice and the boy beside him, didn't even understand what was being said to him.

"Jano has offered his blessings upon this joining." She declared after a long, tense moment and Liam thought for certain he could hear his father sigh in relief. "May their lives grow together and from their union may peace and prosperity fill both our lands." She took one of the rings in her hand and stood before Liam. "Do you vow before Jano to honor and protect your spouse, to hold each other before all others?"

"I do." He said, barely above a whisper. She took his hand from the staff but left the cord binding his wrist and hand. The cord felt heavy but he held his hand still as she slipped one of the rings on the ring finger of his left hand. The metal felt cold on his skin but didn't invoke the panic he'd feared it would. This was the price of peace and it was one well worth paying.

The priestess moved in graceful steps to stand before the Bastion man to his side and she gathered up the trailing red silk and lifted the boys slender wrist by it as she slid the end of the staff, he was holding, away. Carefully, as if speaking slower would help him to understand, she repeated the same question and maybe speaking slower did help. Maybe the boy had been coached with what to listen for because when she finished he whispered a stuttering yes. Very carefully, her fingers only touching the metal while the other hand held his wrist in the air by the silk, she slipped the ring upon his finger.

Gently she lowered the silk and with it the gold bangle adorned arm. She paused for a moment before raising her eyes to the gathered crowd and raising her voice. "May all the gods smile upon these two. May the union of their lives and the union of kingdoms brought with it be ever filled with joy, peace and happiness. May the Queen of Death be ever far from their lives and may Lord Jano hold them dear to His heart and fill their years with warmth and joy. By the customs and laws of the Kingdom of Corena, the keepers of the promise of the Lanning, by the rituals and rites of Lord Jano, I so proclaim these souls bound more firmly than by any mere cord, joined in blessed marriage until they part in this life. As it is so may it always be!"

She smiled and stepped back. "It is my honor to yield the traditions of Corena to those of Bastion and I have been equally honored to be allowed to provide the sacred fires." She stepped smoothly back, moving carefully and with rounding motions to keep robes and hair in line. The two younger women moved with her but they didn't return to the crowd. Once they were off to the side a small ball of flames formed in mid air and then slowly swirled and grew, folding and rolling over itself as it lowered toward the tile and grew wider until it formed the proper size, twelve steps around and throwing off some solid heat.

Irend stepped forward and claimed the red silk leash again and carefully brought Deseem back to stand behind him. "Your Majesties, with your permission, I take back the least of my property and give to your house the greatest treasure of mine."

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Chapter Fifteen

Korin stood and stepped forward. "Take back the least and leave the rest." He answered firmly, sternly.

But it was all in Trade and Irend had to lean and whisper to Deseem. Liam watched as the fabric draped figure moved carefully, stepping from the plain sandals on his feet and placing slender bare feet on the cold stone tile floor. The feet were thin but did look more masculine, the same went for the hands, so at least he was pretty certain the person under the layers of dress was male and not some maid switched out. Really, in those clothes, Liam wouldn't know who he was marrying until they came off, it was a matter of trust and his trust for Bastion wasn't very strong.

The sandals were quickly gathered up and handed back to his manservant. It took a few flicks of his hands to loop the red silk around Deseem's free wrist, lightly binding them together. "Who would take this, my greatest treasure, child of my mother, who has eaten at my table and been sheltered under my roof while growing into the most beautiful and pure flower of all my lands? Who would take her now that she is ready to be a wife, now that she has learned humility, grace and is ripe to offer comfort for the long years ahead?" Irend called out.

No one had told Liam if he was to answer so he stood silent and he guessed right. Behind them his father's voice echoed out. "My house and my son shall claim your offer of a bride."

"Prove so to me!" Irend challenged and offered the end of the silk leash to Liam.

He paused for a moment but took the offered end and tried not to frown at how it now tied the boy's wrists together. Their ways were not his ways but for the treaty he would not mock them. Carefully, he took the first steps around the fire, the slack in the fabric disappeared and with short, uneasy steps Liam led the boy around the heat of the fire. As the boy took his first uncertain steps, the Bastion group began to clap and chant, their smaller sound was filled in with matching drum beats and it took Liam's mind a moment to understand what they chanted.

"Walk with fire, circle round, dare to claim a bride." Over and over, a throbbing pace that made him want to go faster but he stayed steady for fear of the boy so tightly bound behind him tripping into the flames. He didn't even dare to glance around and check, he wasn't allowed to look back during this.

Each rotation around earned him another token from Irend. He held it aloft and showed the crowd before offering it to Liam. Each circling of the fire increased the pace of the clapping and more of the crowd joined in, increasing the volume and urgency. Liam balanced the red silk leash and the tokens and kept his pace slow and manageable. His bride tripping or his dropping the tokens would be a disaster but worse would be if the veil slipped from his bride's head. That would stop the ritual cold and they'd have to try again on another day. Liam did not want that to happen.

He had six tokens in his hands and made the final trip around the fire. A great cheer went up as he finished the rotation and Lach moved to collect the tokens from his hands. Liam had a moment of chilled fear when he turned to find Irend standing with a short, sharp dagger in his hands but it was only for a moment. He quickly remembered what he was supposed to do and Liam lifted the bound hands up, unwrapping them a little until the right hand was free.

For the first time his skin touched his husband's, he refused to think of the boy as his wife and he was surprised that he felt nothing. When he'd taken Dorena's hand as her husband for the first time, a tingling chill had shivered across his body. All Liam wanted now was to be finished. He caught the slender fingers and held them together, turning the hand palm up, half draped over the back of his own hand to steady it.

With a smooth, quick motion the dagger bit into the boy's hand, quick down to a point and quick back up. The cut V soon was bloody and bright and Liam was surprised that the boy barely flinched at the shockingly deep cut just below his index finger. He didn't linger on the thought and cupped the slack hand so the blood would run down to be caught in a small ornate cup. It was only a few drops, six was required but Liam was pretty sure it was slightly more that plunked into the empty cup. Wine was poured into it and the cup was offered to Liam.

"May the blood of my house be the blood of yours." Irend said.

Korin replied for Liam, Liam juggled the still bleeding hand with the small cup, downing wine and blood in a quick swallow. "The blood of your house is now mingled with the blood of mine." He answered as Liam lowered the cup.

Irend took the cup and handed it away, taking up the small bowl of red powder. "Too much blood has been shed between our houses, may this be the last."

Liam took a large pinch of the powder and knew it was going to hurt. The strength of the marriage was judged on the depth of the color given to the cut, he had to rub the dye in. Not just to fulfill their traditions but to stop the sluggish blood flow. It impressed him that the boy didn't pull away or resist as Liam used his thumb to grind the powder into the wound. As the pinch was rubbed in the bleeding stopped, leaving the boy's palm smeared in blood and dye.

"The greatest treasure of your house." Korin began when Liam looked up. "Is now the greatest of mine. She shall be sheltered under my roof, fed from my table and protected by my blood."

Lach nudged Liam a little and handed him a pair of slippers. Embroidered on them was the oak leaf and acorn of the royal family and he knelt down. There was no way he could see up under the veil but he wondered if the boy could see him at all, maybe a flash of black uniform and white hair, maybe not even that much. Carefully Liam guided each barefoot into the warmer shoes and then stood up, claiming the red silk sash again in his hand. The Bastion party cheered again, clapping and stamping their feet as the slippers were placed and Liam stood, hoping there was nothing more.

"The greatest treasure of my Kingdom is gifted to yours." Irend declared a final time. "May their union and ours prosper!"

"This day truly is blessed." Korin answered. "If it pleases you, Prince Irendorialah, for you and yours to join us and ours at a feast of celebration?"

"Your hospitality is much welcomed and a celebration is in order."

Liam stood still as his parents filed out followed by Irend and his wife, then his brothers with their wives beside them and it left Liam to lead like a dog, his new husband from the room. The side room was too small to hold so many people comfortably and he was grateful to see that the Bastion party and his parents had continued on to a further room. It wouldn't take long to be called for the feast, ten minutes, maybe a little more but Liam didn't feel like being social.

"Jan's on her way back." Lach said and as Malcome walked by to join their parents his older brother gave him a nod.

"Thank you." Liam answered and found himself clenching the red silk lead in his hand. He wanted to untie it from the boy's wrist but it was how he was expected to lead him. When he thought about it, it did make some sense, considering the heavy veil did make him almost blind. "Are we allowed to have a Healer see to the wound?"

Lach shrugged. "As I understand it you basically own him now, so I doubt anyone can protest too loudly."

"Good." Movement caught his eye and the twins slipped past the guards with a nod and smile. They weren't the official palace Healers but they were on the list and since they were technically family it wasn't uncommon for them to be around. Liam had always preferred them, Jas and Jan had been the only Healers that had been open with him about how his magic made them nervous. Which should have pushed him away but oddly drew him closer. Everyone had been frightened of him in those first months but the twins had been the only two honest with him about it.

Jas came over and stood on tiptoes to kiss the side of his face. "Congratulations, Liam."

"Thank you." He answered out of habit.

"They'll want to seat you pretty quickly." Lach reminded him and Liam nodded.

"Jan can you?" Liam had to reach and take the boy's limp, passive hand. He ignored the slight flinch at the contact and figured it was just from being startled. He turned the palm up and the messy stained wound. "It has to heal with the mark dyed red."

"I think I can manage. Sis? Can you get me some water, I want to clean this off when I'm done."

"Sure thing." She smiled warmly and moved away.

Liam wondered what it was like for his new husband, veiled and hearing the same voice from two different people. He held the slender hand steady but Jan didn't need to actually touch the wound to weave the flesh back together.

"There we go that has to be better." She grinned again, the wound was still hidden under the scabbed up drying blood and paste made from the dye, but there was something professional and set to her smile not her normal bright smile. "Liam...he's..."

"I'm sorry, Jan, Liam they want you two to get seated now." Lach broke in.

"Okay, I'm sorry, Jan, tell me later?"

She nodded and watched as Liam led his bride away by the silk leash and was still standing in the room, thinking when her sister returned with a cloth and a bowl of water. "Oh, missed them."

"I'm sure one of the servants has a cloth ready, come on sis, let's get to our seats."

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Chapter Sixteen

They were led to a side entrance to the main hall where court dinners were served and events held. More tables than normal were in place and the hall was filling easily. Guests arrived from four main entrances and were smoothly seated and few seemed to be waiting for their spots. It always surprised him how skillfully big events were directed but he'd much rather admire it as an outsider.

His family and the Bastion party had been seated at a central table, both groups intermingled and it surprised him that they were really the last to arrive. People cheered and clapped, and Liam nodded his thanks but let the servant continue to guide them to their smaller table set to the side. It was, traditionally, the first time a newly married couple was given a chance to speak. A kind of get to know each other time before moving to the wedding chamber and the marriage

bed it held. Liam placed a soft hand on the small of the boy's back and leaned a little closer.

"There's a chair here, sit down gently." He whispered in Bastion and was pleased at the small gasped breath and how the hidden head swiveled a little at him. His understanding of their language truly was unknown and that was one secret that pleased him to have been kept.

The boy nodded a little and sat down, carefully but he sat so straight that his back didn't touch the chair. Liam figured it was the dress but with the billowing layers it was difficult to see if the deepest layer really was as tight as he'd been told. "Here, let me see your hand. Did the Healer help?" There was a bowl of warm water placed between their dishes and a folded bit of cloth waiting to be used. He dipped the cloth into the water and washed the dye and blood from his own hands first.

Uncertainly, Deseem offered his cut hand again, surprised and shocked that his husband spoke their words. He'd been told he wouldn't. "Yes, my husband." He answered softly, carefully. Warm, soft cloth soothed over his hand with far more gentle care than he'd expected.

"It looks like she did a good job, all Healed up. Does it hurt still?" It really was a clean job, the wound closed to a red V shaped scar.

"No, my husband."

Liam finished washing the slender hand and draped the cloth over the bowl. A nearby servant arrived quickly to remove it and it reminded him that while no one was allowed to approach them, every eye would be on them. "I'm told your name is Deseemdamiah, do you know my name?"

There was a pause before he veil shook. "No, my husband."

"No one told you?"

"I...I was not directly told, no, my husband."

"But you've heard?" He felt a little angry that the boy didn't even really know his name.

"Watcher Liamcorena." The name came out tight and crisp, slurred together as if it was one name.

"Liam... Corena..."

"I'm sorry, my husband."

"You don't need to call me that."

"I..." Deseem stopped himself and nodded, silently.

"My family calls me Liam, I'd like you to do the same. Should I call you Deseemdamiah?"

"If it pleases you, Liam, my husband."

He resolved right there to make sure the boy learned Trade. No spouse would ever address their husband so formally in Trade, the language wasn't built for it. He knew Bastion names were shortened by family and friends and the full name was only used for formalities. "What is it your family calls you?"

"Deseem, my husband."

"Deseem it is." He was grateful when the first course arrived and he had the food for a distraction. He was also glad that the servants moved quickly and the food on the plates was small in portion. Liam split a bite of the fruit from his plate and began the tedious process of putting one bite at a time on the red plate beside him.

"If you've been as nervous as I've been," Liam said softly. "I bet you aren't too hungry."

"No, my husband."

He held back his irritation at the formalities and focused on getting past each course. Bite by bite, he watched the gold bangles slide on the lean wrist as the boy's fingers delicately slipped each small bite under the veil. Course after course slipped by and Liam found himself grateful when the final one arrived, three oblong almond and honey flavored crisp cake like cookies. As he nibbled at them and broke off sections for Deseem, various ambassadors stepped forward and offered wedding presents to Liam's parents but he really didn't pay a great deal of attention. The gifts were offered to the kingdom, not to him directly.

Until Irend stood up. "Gifts for my new brother and the wife that was my sister!" He called out and several of his servants came in the room. Four carried small well crafted wood boxes with ornate inlaid stone patterns and they opened them to show piles of gold chains and shiny, cut stones of many colors to both Liam and the room. The room started to whisper but more servants arrived, carrying two larger chests between them. These were opened to show mounds of brightly colored silks. "Gold and silks as a small symbol of the prosperity that shall flourish between our peoples but for my new brother directly from me." Irend stepped around the table and met a final servant. The object he collected was long and slender. One end was ornate silver with inset stones but the rod that extended from it was plain and tan and had some weight to it.

"My sister is properly humble, submissive and obedient." Irend spoke as he came around to the table where Liam and Deseem sat. Liam stood to meet him but Deseem stayed where he was sitting. As he grew closer, Irend repeated his words in Bastion. "Should she fail you, should she shame you or disobey you, she responds well to the rod. It shall be unnecessary but if it is, use this rod to beat her so she may remember her place." Irend offered the staff on his fingertips and waited.

The room had gone silent. Liam met Irend's eye and glanced behind him to his family but they looked equally surprised. It was only a pause but Liam recovered. "Thank you." He bowed a little and lightly took the rod onto his own fingertips. "I'm certain that it will be unnecessary."

Which must have been the proper thing to do because Irend nodded and stepped away. Liam stayed standing until the man returned to his seat and then he sat down as well, placing the ornate and obviously very well crafted staff on the table. He called a servant over and waited until the man leaned down. "Please see to it that this staff is placed in our suite as soon as the tables are cleared and have someone check for me to see if it is a ritual gift or if I'm actually expected to beat my husband with it? If there's some odd Bastion wedding ritual where I've got to hurt him to show I can keep him in line I want to know about it sooner than later."

"Yes, sir." The man nodded and hurried away.

"Has anyone told you of our balls, Deseem?" He asked to fill the silence as the crowd started away to the ballroom. Only a few hundred had been invited to the dinner but court Balls were always open to anybody who was allowed to attend court. That meant every Senator, their families, nobles, Watchers, priests and more, several thousand people would be able to attend and while most wouldn't, it could be quite large.

"Only that there would be one, my husband."

"There will be a great number of people there and many that wish a word but we're to be

removed by the fourth song. Chairs will be brought and I'll let you know to sit, there will be arms on the chair, hold on to them. We'll be carried from the room on the chairs, there will be shouting and clapping but don't worry, they won't drop you. Just stay still and they'll take us to our room."

"Yes, husband."

At least that time my husband had been shortened to just husband so that was some progress. He really couldn't expect the boy to understand until they were alone and he could talk to him in private face to face. Liam knew that Deseem had to be expecting certain things once they were alone and if he were in the boy's shoes, he wouldn't expect them to be pleasant things. At least he'd been friends with Dorena and they'd discussed the wedding night in advance, the fact that their marriage had been consummated that first night was unplanned and had simply happened naturally. There was no way to politely tell Deseem that nothing beyond conversation was going to happen once they were alone.

It didn't take long for them to be guided from the table and down a hallway to the ballroom. Music was already playing so they were at least part ways through the first song. Liam moved carefully, aware of Deseem's small steps and the swirls of people. There was no way they could dance, and he wasn't sure he would if he could. He'd never danced with another man before, not court formal dancing and he wasn't sure who would even lead.

There were people he knew and titles he knew and more well wishers than he wanted to know. Lach stayed near him and Bekka too and it left Malcome and their parents to mingle with Irend and his party. The treaty wouldn't be signed until the morning, in a ceremony in the Senate but everyone was as happy as if it already was. He tried to smile and look pleased and not look like the big scary monster so many people considered him. Lach joked for him and seemed to know everyone that was anyone, which as Prince and Captain he would. Deseem stood where Liam placed him, a form of silk and color that didn't speak or move.

All too soon a wedge of black Watcher uniforms cut through the crowds mixed with cousins and other relations and they were laughing and joking, some sang snatches of songs that clashed with the proper court ball music being played and they brought with them two chairs.

"Time to go!" One of them shouted.

"They've more important things to do!" Another added and the chairs were placed down.

Liam moved to stand beside Deseem. "Sit, the chair is low, reach back, feel the arms?"

The boy nodded and lowered himself down. As soon as he was seated the chair was hefted with a bounce into the air. The boy in his bright colors and fully veiled seemed vulnerable being bounced around and Liam saw how his hands dug into the arms of the chair. Before he could warn them to be careful, hands caught his shoulders and pulled him back. It triggered a need to hit them and force their hands away, a reaction to fight that he pushed down and he let himself be pushed into his own chair.

"Trying to get away!"

"Not going to escape so easily!"

"The night is still young for you, Liam!"

He tried to grin but it felt like a grimace and to the hoots and shouts of the crowd, he was soon lifted up to bounce around on magic and hands. It was an unsteady trip filled with the lewd jokes and singing of the Watchers and cousins, most of which he did actually know. They were dipped down to pass under doorways and popped back up again on the other side and it seemed like they traveled forever down hallways.

Finally doors were flung open and Liam backtracked their trip and guessed it was in the private sections of the palace and in a quiet corner not really used all that often. Which was fine by him since he wasn't sure he wanted to stay in the palace at all once they were settled and had more time to consider things, he'd be happier in one of the Watcher dorms. The main room of the suite was large but not huge, had a nice sized table that would easily seat four, six if they were close, eight if they were down right friendly. There was a fireplace and bookshelves and soft comfortable chairs clustered near by with small tables between. It was pleasant enough in a pre-decorated, not overly personal way.

Their chairs were placed down with a bump and Liam was patted on the back, his hair was mussed up and more lewd jokes and comments were tossed about. He didn't take it personally, they were half drunk already and it was how things were done. If anything, they meant it to take the sting out of the situation, not as a sharper reminder that he was now married to a total stranger.

"Go on, get out of here." He teased back as best he could when he stood up and saw that they'd not really shut the door but held it open a crack to snicker and peer in like children. They laughed outright and slammed the door that final inch. Liam didn't trust it, he moved and made sure the door was really closed.

Deseem still sat in his chair, his hands clutched the sides so hard his knuckles were white. "It's okay, they're gone now."

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Chapter Seventeen

Deseem stood up, slowly but otherwise didn't move.

"Now, you and I, we need to talk." Liam said as he moved the chairs, they were carried in, closer to the door and rang the bell for a servant. "So how about we get you into something more comfortable, order in some simple food and wine and figure out what we're going to do now?" He glanced over but Deseem hadn't moved. "I'm sure they moved your things in here so why don't you go get changed?"

"I..."

"It's okay, what's wrong?"

"I'm not allowed to, I'm sorry, my husband."

"Of course you can, it's just us here."

"No, I...I can't, the dress...its tradition, only my husband can remove the bridal attire. I must remain in it until you take me out if it, if it pleases you."

He refused to curse another kingdom's customs but the formality and ownership of Bastion men pissed him off on a level that was deeper than logic. So he gritted his teeth. "Of course. Here, let's get this veil off you first."

The red fabric was pinned in place and Liam had to find the pins and free them to slip the red silk away. He was struck again by how beautiful the boy was, even with the bold make up and the way his hair was braided in such a fancy way. Worse, his golden amber eyes were even more shocking up close and Liam reminded himself that while they were married, they wouldn't be the first couple to have a cold bed.

The boy's eyes went wide and round. "Hello." Liam said gently, frightened of spooking the boy with a too loud word. He wondered if he remembered him or if maybe Liam had made some mistake and it was another amber eyed man that had freed him. He wondered if the boy was surprised at Liam's age or shocked by his pale skin and less than beautiful looks. "Do you remember me?" Liam asked gently when Deseem started to tremble a little and the unblinking golden eyes didn't seem to really see him.

His answer came as the wide eyes fluttered and the slender body fell straight back, like a dropped tree. Liam leapt forward and wasn't in time to catch all of his new husband but he did manage to keep him from cracking his head on the wood floor. The bells in the hair chimed and he was pretty sure some of the draping layers of dress tore a little but Liam didn't care.

"Deseem. Deseem?" He patted the sides of the painted face but the boy was out.

The door to the suite opened and the servant he'd called for arrived. "Oh, my..." She whispered.

"Go, quickly, fetch a Healer, first one you find, Janaria if you can find her easier and be quiet about it!" A hand closed around Liam's wrist and he glanced down to find bright eyes open and seeing again.

"Please, please, I'm okay, my husband." Deseem whispered. "Please, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, forgive me, please, I am not too damaged, please do not reject me, please, my husband. I will not disobey, I'll be a good wife, I swear, please accept me, I will try to be pleasing to you, please, my husband, forgive me." He struggled a little to sit up but his movements were clumsy in the tight dress and strong hands held him steady.

"Stay still." Liam ordered and was glad when the whispered begging voice stopped. "I've sent for a Healer."

"Please..." Deseem whispered again.

"Shh, we're wed. For better or worse it's done, I won't reject you. Now lay still and wait for the Healer." He kept a hand on the slender shoulder and tried not to think about the too damaged part of his begging pleas.

It took a moment but Jan and Jas slipped in the door without knocking. "That was quick but I'm glad to see you two."

"We were on our way over to send you a note. I'm sorry Liam, I should have warned you; he's worn pretty thin. Was worried something like this would happen. He just keel over?" Jan moved in smoothly and knelt on the other side of Deseem.

Liam nodded. "Startled him I think." He switched to Bastion. "Deseem, this is Jan and her sister

Jas, they're Healers and cousins of mine, so cousins of yours, it's okay."

"Did he hit his head?" Jan asked, still not sure if she was allowed to touch him or not.

"No, I got under him in time."

"Hang on..." Her eyes unfocused, or rather focused on what only a Healer could see but she didn't look for long. "He's dehydrated, half starved to death, and doesn't look like he's slept a decent night in forever but I don't see anything really wrong. He just feels fragile but given some care, he'll be right as rain." She glanced up even though her sister didn't say anything. "Jas?"

She shook her head. "Nothing I can see casual like looking but something is odd with him. It can wait though, I can do a better check later."

Jan nodded. "Okay, be gentle with him Liam, get him something to eat first and some time to settle down."

"First?" Liam questioned.

The sisters shared a look and Jas shrugged. Which left it up to Jan to answer from whatever silent debate they'd shared. "No one told you?"

"Told me what?"

"Bastion law..."

"What about it?"

"Well...you two aren't wed until the marriage has been consummated. Well, actually, not until the husband takes the wife and introduces her to his own flesh, as the law says."

Liam wasn't sure but he thought he might faint now. "What?"

"I can see why no one bothered to tell you that part."

"I'm not doing that, he's like a scared puppy already. Can't we, you know, fake it?"

The sisters shared a look again and again Jan sighed and answered. "They'll have someone with Sight check."

"Check what?"

She shrugged. "The sheets I'd imagine and if it's inconclusive, the bride must be physically examined. I was given the information for the exam, it's quite...shall we say...thorough and has to be performed with you in the room, the bride's male relation and three witnesses. If the test shows no signs of interaction, the bride's male relation will spend the next night in the bedroom, his back to the bed, to listen for confirmation of the marriage being consummated and the exam has to be performed again the next morning."

Liam stayed where he was crouched down and felt a smirk tugging his lips. "This is some stupid idea of a joke Lach had, right?" Jan shook her head but he looked to Jas knowing she wouldn't let the joke go on for too long.

"We're afraid not, Liam."

"Worse, the treaty can't be signed until the marriage is complete."

That was the real kicker. He just may be selfish enough to refuse and then throw a fit about the exam and have that refused and selfish enough to be a pain in everyone's side just for principle's sake but he wasn't selfish enough to risk the treaty. He glanced down to where his new husband lay, eyes wide and frightened, listening to the conversation going on around him that he couldn't understand and then he glanced to the two sisters.

"Is he medically up for this?"

"Sadly? It doesn't make a difference but yes, if you're gentle."

"Which from how frightened he is, he's not expecting." Jas added.

"Great, so everyone knew this and no one told me. What if I hadn't..."

"Lach left a note." Jan smiled gently to the wide eyed boy and tried to support his systems as much as she could without making him worse. "Anyway, we'll go, just feed him and get some water in him or tea, tea would be better. Let's get him up and in a chair, slowly. Am I allowed to touch him?"

"I don't care if you do." Liam answered but wasn't sure about Bastion law. "Deseem, Jan wants to get you up and sitting in a chair before she leaves, we'll help but go slowly. Would you mind if we help you? She can take one arm and I can take the other?"

That seemed to surprise Deseem as much as seeing who he was wed to. "If it pleases my husband." He whispered but Liam didn't miss how he half flinched away when they got a hold of his forearms and elbows and slowly helped him sit up and from there, standing up and guided into a chair.

"Thanks, you two."

"Do you want us to stay for awhile?" Jas asked carefully.

He did, he absolutely did. The last thing he wanted was to be left alone with his new husband but he sighed and shook his head. "No, it isn't fair to avoid this. Can you have them send something proper for him to eat?"

"Sure thing." They smiled and patted his arm and smiled at the solemn eyed Deseem and were soon gone. It left him alone with Deseem sitting in one of the chairs at the table and Liam wasn't sure what to do or say so he settled on direct and honest.

He moved carefully to the table and took the chair nearest Deseem, pulled it away a little and sat down. "This must be awkward for you. You are the boy that saved me, set me and my partner free, aren't you?"

Deseem didn't answer and just lowered his eyes.

"My family knows someone traveling with your king helped us but I've never told them enough to identify you. I was worried it would get into official reports and maybe drift back to your father and he'd know who it was and it would cause trouble. Only Jas knows, she's my Soulhealer, I told her. The Gods must be getting a good laugh out of this one, bringing us back together like this." Deseem's eyes stayed lowered. "I owe you my life and so much more than just my thanks. I doubt you're thrilled to be married but I promise you, I will try to be a good husband, try to be fair to you."

He rubbed his eyes and the silence was heavy. "I guess you don't want to talk about the past, huh?" Liam nodded. "I can respect that. It was you, wasn't it? Just tell me that much."

"Yes, my husband."

"I thought as much. I'm told your eye color is about as common as my hair. I don't expect you to believe me when I say, I will try to be fair to you and I'm told just tonight that I can't even offer you a chance to avoid... avoid the marriage bed. I had intended to wait, to maybe never....but that can't happen, you know this, right?"

"I was told, my husband and I am prepared to offer you pleasure."

From other, more willing lips that sentence would have hit Liam like a lightening bolt but whispered from Deseem, it made him feel lecherous and bad. "We may have little choice tonight but no law says we have to say hello and then I simply drag you to the bedroom. I have food coming, and something to drink. Why don't we both change into clothes we can breath in, take our time, eat something and then worry about what we're expected to do. We're both children of royal lines, I think we both understand the situation is one of obligation, not pleasure." He was going to go through with it but Liam wasn't going to enjoy it.

"Yes, my husband."

"Liam, call me Liam."

"Yes, my husband."

He sighed. "Let's get changed, you're certain I have to take those clothes off you?"

Deseem nodded.

"Of course I do." He muttered in Trade and when he stood up, Deseem followed. He didn't have to lead, the man stayed three paces behind him without being told. He opened the bedroom and stopped.

Candles burned and gave the soft scent of honey to the room. Bowls of fruit were placed about, the bed was turned down with petals of flowers scattered across the sheets. Glass bottles with swirls of color held perfumed oils and unscented oils. On a side table sat nuts and sweet little cakes drizzled in honey with pitchers of wine and goblets. He'd asked for casual and comfortable and this wasn't either. "No pressure here." He whispered and turned to offer a comforting smile to Deseem.

"Let's see...." He said, in Bastion, trying to remind himself that he'd have to use those words not Trade. There was a small dressing table and placed on it were two folded outfits. One in black and one in pale green, loose, fine cotton pants and shirts, loungewear for sleeping. A luxury Liam wasn't used to any more, he'd been sleeping on the ground, in his uniform with a dog for a pillow. The dressing table also had small wood box to catch jewelry and a bowl with steaming hot water and a cloth to wipe away make up. Liam got the hint, he had to take all the bridal attire off, down to the make up.

The first layer was easy, it was little more than a length of cloth draped around the slender body. Liam unwrapped it with ease but he didn't like how Deseem kept his eyes down. "Five layers left." He tried to make light of it and not think, that it was five layers to a very beautiful, very submissive young man that considered himself property.

The second layer was wider and longer but it wound around the lean body in drapes and folds. There were no ties or hooks, just careful folds and pleats that held it in place and Liam had to actually walk around Deseem to unwind the seemingly endless layer. He busied his hands by folding the length as he went and then setting it aside beside the narrower, shorter outer most layer on the dressing table bench.

The wraps were now gone and the dresses below were shockingly tight. The innermost layer that peeked out was red, then yellow, then a pink and finally orange. Each dress while tight was slightly shorter in hem, neckline, and sleeves than the layer below, so worn together all layers showed in a beautiful array of color. These layers were easier to remove, they had tiny hooks up the back and Liam made quick work unhooking them. The dress slipped away, down and pool at Deseem's feet. Liam doubted the boy could bend his knees far enough to really step out of them so he simply unhooked the remaining layers. Each one slipped away and fell in a flutter of silk, embroidery, and color to the floor.

"Here, let me..." Liam knelt and gathered the fabric up so when Deseem lifted a foot he only had to slide it under to free that leg.

Liam made the mistake of glancing up as he gathered the dropped dresses together. He suddenly wished he wasn't such an honorable person as he glanced up long red silk covered legs. The fabric was literally skin tight, curved under the sharp angle of the boy's hip bone, smoothed over his ribs, peaked a little over his nipples, and tucked into the curve of his shoulder like a caress. He couldn't help himself, he wanted to touch. He wanted to run his hands over that silk clad body, feel the flesh below the soft fabric that would be warmed with the heat of the boy's body. Against his will, his eyes drifted down to the boy's groin and the softly raised bump the silk hid.

Deseem was, without a doubt, not a woman and not a wife and Liam shivered. He wanted to run his hands up the legs, feel the breath hitch in the boy's stomach, over his ribs and see how his nipples would peak with the soft tease. He wanted to pet the rounded silk shoulder and down to the gentle, erotic curve of the slender back. Lower down, he wanted to tease and to touch the roundness of the silk clad ass and feel how the fabric brushed and touched the skin hidden from him. Worse, he wanted to stroke that soft mound, that hidden length and feel it harden under such soft fabric, trapped in red silk. He wondered what it would feel like to rub and pet the silky length until the boy found release, or to press his mouth so close, since he was already on his knees, to the obscured flesh and suckle.

His breath was short now and his stomach tingled at the thought. It had been months since he'd had a lover and he'd been under too much stress lately. Anxiety and stress made him horny, he knew that, he knew his body liked a good release to relax and he'd been too distracted to pay attention. He could control himself, he would control himself because he didn't want to make the fear in the boy's eyes any stronger. There may be no choice in touching him later but Liam was going to see to it that he had something to eat and drink before asking anything more stressful of him.

He cleared his throat and pushed down his entirely improper and purely physical reaction. "Sewn on, yes?" Liam managed to ask without his voice cracking like a teenagers.

Deseem nodded.

"I'm supposed to just rip the seams?"

"If it pleases my husband."

It didn't. Liam found the bottom seam, down by the boy's knee and pressed his fingernail to it. He focused a little and heated the thread and felt it pop under the slight pressure. Up he ran his nail, over the side of the boy's knee, to his outer thigh. Up over the outer edge of his hip and back around his waist to the small of his back. Up over the curve of his spine all the way to the back of his neck, which was easy and all very well and good but now the boy was about to step from the final layer and stand naked in the room and that was not something Liam was ready for.

He didn't fold the discarded dresses, just dropped them on the bench and gathered up the comfortable sleeping clothes. When he turned back, the red dress had half fallen from the boy's

body. It hung from the side of one hip exposing a leg and half of his bare ass and gapped open to show his back. It was a very lovely sight but Liam would be blind not to see how the boy's hands were clenched into fists, how he hunched his shoulders up a little and how every muscle was tensed with nervous fear. As much as it would be visually pleasing to see his new husband naked but for the bangles of gold on his wrists and ankles, with his hair braided and woven around the elaborate headpiece, they weren't lovers and Liam had no right.

"Here now." Liam offered the green set of clothes to the boy. He had to walk around and actually press the fabric to the boy's chest. Liam was quite careful to keep his eyes up, fearful the silk had slipped too far from the center of the slender body and he'd see more than he should. "I'm going to go into the bathing room and get out of this stiff uniform. I figure that dress is pretty much off of you, so change okay? Food will be here soon."

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Chapter Eighteen

He didn't wait for an answer but hurried to the bathing room and quickly shut the door behind him. The room was covered in lit candles with baskets of bath sponges, scented soaps and oils and flower petals all around a tiled tub built into the room, big enough for three or four people. The water privy was set behind a low wall. There was a corner with a low raised wall and a shower and beside that a sink. The wall closest to the tub had a wood shelf with rolled fluffy towels, extra soaps and oils with a wood bench placed near by.

"Gods, it's like some fantasy of a harem." Liam had never seen such an over the top effort made for seduction. His first night married had been spent in Dorena's suite of rooms and she'd kept things as she'd left them. Straight forward and efficient with Norlan sleeping in a side room for most of the night and none of the false frippery to set a romantic mood. Not that he'd needed it, he'd been seventeen and desperate for any affection. She'd been right, it was who you were with not how many petals were on the bed.

He stripped off the uniform easily and actually would have been more comfortable keeping it on but it was unfair to ask Deseem to change into something so casual when he was unwilling to be so equally exposed. He found a narrow bar with waiting empty hangers and made quick work to fold and hang his uniform. He could order the servants to remove all the extra nonsense from the room but he didn't know how Deseem would take that. Would he see it as a lessening of pressure and expectations or a sign of rejection? Without knowing, Liam decided not to risk it.

The sleeping clothing was comfortable and soft but loose and would be as easy to get out of as it was to get into it. He paused finding no slippers or socks and figured it was warm enough in the rooms to just go barefoot. And it may have just been to stall, but he washed up as well before he

felt ready to face his new partner in the bedroom.

Any hopes of waiting to see the boy nude, or partially nude, were crushed. Deseem stood where Liam had left him, in the center of the room and he had removed the opened red dress but he'd only pulled on the soft green pants. They hung on him, even cinched tight, they were a good couple of sizes too large and sat at the top of his hip bones.

Jan hadn't been kidding, the boy was slimmed down to a frightening to see level. It looked like he hadn't been fed regular meals for a long time. His hip bones were too sharp, his stomach was flat but it led up to a sharp curve of his ribs and Liam swore he could count those ribs by sight. The boys collarbones stuck out when his shoulders should have been far more muscled for how broad they were.

He was far skinnier than Liam preferred but he could see how the boy would fill out with care. He'd be as beautiful in body as he was in face, with masculine shoulders that would taper to a lean waist and narrow hip. It struck him that with some fresh air, good meals and exercise the boy would grow to look a lot like his older brother. Strong, confident, with a warriors body able to handle any situation and that was going to be a bad thing because that was the kind of man Liam found himself drawn to.

"You're not dressed?"

"I'm sorry, my husband, I...I'm unable to get the shirt over my hair. I'm sorry."

"Oh, yes, well, forgot that I had to do that too." He moved over to the dressing table. "Sit and we'll get it taken down. Not that I know what I'm doing, this must have taken hours to do..." He mumbled more to fill the silence as the boy carefully walked over to the dressing table and sat down. "Hmm, here now, if I pull it let me know?"

It took some effort to get the hang of it and find the pins and clips tucked into the braids but once Liam saw the pattern he made quick work of it. The headpiece came apart into two pieces, the top snapping free and the base unclipping from the black braids. From there he found where the little clips with the bells held the braids on top of the boy's head and got those removed. There were other smaller clips and pins he pulled out and before long Deseem sat with thirty six braids hanging loose around his head but the golden eyes stayed lowered, unwilling to even lift them and look at himself in the mirror.

On a whim, Liam slipped the tie at the end of one of the braids free and quickly untwisted the dark hair. It was braided tight and it should be pulling on the boy's scalp and had to hurt. It was an easy excuse to undo the fussy complicated style and he let his hands make quick work of it but he found as the last braid unraveled that it wasn't enough to just untwist the plaits, he wanted to touch that hair too. It was as black as his was white but coarse and heavy and smooth like silk while his was soft and fine and tended to fly away too easily. It tumbled in crimped waves down the boy's back to below his shoulder blades almost to the same length as Liam's own hair and it surprised him how much that pleased him. He chalked that up to spending too many years with the Fisher Folk and adopting their preferences.

He stopped petting the heavy dark hair and pulled his hands away. "Better?"

The head below his hands nodded but the eyes didn't raise and he didn't speak.

"How about the make up? Here now..." The water had cooled but that was easy to heat back up and it steamed as he squeezed out the extra water. The make up washed off under the warm, wet cloth, smearing a little but with each one of Liam's careful swipes, the face below took on a more normal tone and made the boy look more his age and far less feminine.

"What about the bracelets, are they part of the bridal attire?"

"Yes, my husband."

"Okay." Liam crouched down and took up a slender hand. Eighteen gold bracelets slipped easily from the boy's wrists and Liam had to untie the red silk leash from the one arm as well. He moved without waiting to the boy's ankles and found those bangles had small clasps and he quickly snapped them off. As the box on the dressing table filled with round gold bracelets, Liam pushed the idea of seeing Deseem naked wearing only the gold aside.

"Better..." He smiled and tried to glance up and catch the boy's eyes. "Food should be here soon, why don't you go to the bathroom, wash up and finish dressing?"

"Yes, my husband." Deseem answered.

Liam waited until the boy was in the bathing room, the door pulled closed behind him but not shut as if he was unsure if he should be given such privacy, before he sat down on the floor and rubbed his eyes. "So much for being able to have a conversation with him."

A knock on the door in the other room brought him up off the floor but before he could answer, the door opened slightly and servants brought a tray of food in. "Thank you." He answered automatically and they smiled gently and bowed a little and hurried away. On the tray he found a note and he opened it to find a quick letter from Jan.

Liam, the boy needs some real, solid meals and protein but nothing too heavy tonight. Found this lovely bread pudding in the kitchen filled with apples and raisins. Eat some yourself and I had them send a nice herbal tea. It'll soothe both your nerves, but I did soothe him a bit so he should be able to eat... Thinking of you, Jan

He heard a soft shuffling step and glanced up to see Deseem standing in the doorway. He'd washed the last of the make up from his face, making some of his hair wet. The green shirt was on him, thankfully, but it hung on him. He still had the oak and acorn slippers on his feet and it left Liam to wonder if he'd wear them until having them removed from his person.

Liam smiled as gently as he could and hoped it didn't look like a grimace. "Jan says you need to eat and I can't disagree. It's nothing fancy." He took one of the bowls from the tray and placed it at an empty spot. The pudding was warm and he heated it with a touch of magic so it was steaming before he shook about half the small side bowl of berries and sliced fruit over the warm bread and pouring some of the cool sweetened flavored cream over it. "It's good." He poured the tea and then turned and fixed his own snack, suddenly painfully hungry as the smell hit him.

Deseem moved closer and took the seat Liam had pulled out for him but he waited until Liam sat and took his own bite before taking up the spoon and eating. Liam tried to watch without staring but the golden eyes stayed lowered so it didn't really matter. He smiled for real as the first bite hit the boy's mouth and some of the nervous unease melted at the sweet berry spice flavor. As he swallowed his stomach growled like low rolling thunder and Liam couldn't help but chuckle at it.

"I'm sorry, my husband, I promise I am not a burden."

"No, it's okay. I'm pretty hungry too. Tell me, was your brother not feeding you? You seem..." he wanted to say starved or abused. "You seem underfed. Not that I'm much of one to talk. Lach, my brother, he says I look like a scarecrow."

"I...I haven't been eating much recently, my husband."

"Stop that, it's Liam and you don't need to address me with everything you say, it's just us here I know who you're talking to."

"I'm sorry."

He felt like a bully for snapping and he sighed. "It's okay, I'm too used to living alone any more." Liam ate the tasty snack without speaking again and finished his tea but it soon became obvious that Deseem was lingering over his and his stomach was growling for him to eat faster. There was little need to wonder why the boy was stalling.

"Deseem?"

Golden eyes flickered up and back down.

"Have you ever been with a man?" He knew that it had been said over and over that Deseem was untouched and a big fuss had been made to make sure no one touched the boy while Liam could see but he didn't believe that for a moment. "Be honest with me, I won't be angry either way."

"No, my...no."

"How about a woman?"

The dark head shook. "No." He took a sip of the tea. "Until tonight? I had never been touched by a woman but you said it was okay for her to help me up."

Liam felt like someone had smacked him in the back of his head with a board. He hadn't ever imagined that by untouched they meant, literally, untouched. "But you have been touched by a man?"

"The servants? They are male but eunuch. My father when he punished me, before I was Bentan, occasionally my brother but only to adjust a braid or something similar."

He suddenly wished Jan had sent something stronger than tea and while wine waited in the bedroom, he didn't want to go there and fetch it. "I'm not asking to pry but we don't have much choice tonight. I don't know what you've been told, what you're expecting... What have you been told about tonight?"

"That I'm not to fight you."

He had to give the boy one thing, he was honest. "Lady bless..." He sighed in Trade before slumping down in his chair. There didn't seem much he could say to make this easier for the boy. "I was a virgin on my wedding night, the first time I was married. I was married to a woman, she was already married to another man." He wasn't quite ready yet to tell Deseem that his wife was the woman captured with him. That was a tender truth and one he wasn't ready to share. "I, at least, understood what men and women do together but I had only little knowledge of what two men do together. She was kind with me." He couldn't help but smile at the memory and had a difficult time believing he'd ever been so young.

"Later that night, all three of us were talking and her husband kissed me. He was kind with me as well and I found I enjoy laying with both men and women. I don't need you to pretend to be a woman, Deseem, because you are a very attractive young man."

"I am your wife."

"But with two men? Here in my kingdom, one doesn't have to pretend to be female for it to be okay. You are my husband, I am your husband. With men there is only top and bottom and I'm comfortable being either. If you'd prefer, you can top me tonight."

Deseem had no idea what that meant or what he was being offered. "I am your wife." He

whispered again.

Well that didn't work and Liam didn't know what else to try. It might have been less traumatic for the boy to top, especially if he didn't have any kree tendencies. Liam wasn't going to let him bottom if he didn't have any attraction to men. That was just cruel and he'd risk being injured by a completely ignorant lover to be able to look himself in the eyes in the morning.

"How about this... when you... you know...pleasure yourself?" He didn't know how to say masturbate in Bastion or even if they had a word for it. "Do you think of men or women?"

"I...pleasure myself?"

"Oh Gods." Liam sighed and refused to mimic the motion of jerking off. He cleared his throat. "You know, touch yourself when it gets hard, for comfort?" He felt the blush creeping up his face and cursed his fair skin.

Deseem shook his head. "I haven't, but if it would please you..."

He had a moment to wonder if maybe they'd had a Healer muck with the boy so he wouldn't become aroused. If that was the case, Jan was getting out of bed and coming back over because he wasn't going to simply use the boy for his own pleasure without trying to return some in exchange.

"What do you do when it...it grows hard?"

Deseem was so surprised that he actually raised his eyes. The pale face of his husband was tinted pink in a blush, and he wondered if he found their conversation as embarrassing as he did. "I wait."

Liam felt his eyebrows raise at that in surprise. "Well..." That got them nowhere. "Okay... which would you rather be alone with, a man or a woman?"

Deseem didn't even pause before he answered. "I'd rather be alone with my husband."

He needed more time, days, weeks, maybe months to get to know the younger man and to let Deseem get to know him. The boy had been raised with such different thinking, such different beliefs, that Liam wasn't sure even with months they would acclimate to one another. Waiting would only make the night slip away and exhaustion drag at both of them.

Liam stood and offered his hand to the seated boy. "I'm sorry, I can't offer more time."

A slender hand rose and uncertainly slipped into Liam's. It was cold and felt hesitant and uneasy in his grip but Deseem stood without being further promoted. Liam brushed a bit of the black hair back and frowned at how, even now, the boy refused to look at him.

"You believe I am your husband?"

"Yes."

"You believe you must obey me?"

"I shall, my husband."

"Then listen to me... look at me, I will not punish you for looking at me, I am not a Bastion husband." He waited until the boy dared to glance up and Liam wondered what he saw there in the golden depths. They were not eyes easily read but he saw uncertainty and unease on the boy's face but more acceptance than fear. "Better. Promise me, tonight, if you wish to stop, you

will say stop or if I hurt you or you are in any form of pain, you'll tell me so?"

"Any...but..." Deseem swallowed and nodded, frightened to contradict his new husband. "Yes, my husband."

"You were told to expect this to cause pain?"

Deseem nodded and his eyes dropped again.

"It shouldn't, if your partner cares to be gentle. What two people do together should cause no pain and I don't wish to hurt you. You will tell me if I hurt you?"

"Yes." Deseem whispered and felt the tender hand that had brushed his hair back softly touch his face. He closed his eyes and was surprised at how little fear he felt. The moment had arrived, he was wed, he was a wife, and must fulfill the promise and duty of a wife. There was no escape, no avoidance any longer and in his head he prayed that it would be over quickly and the morning would find him safe and whole.

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Snowflakes and Embers

Chapter Nineteen

Then lips covered his own and his eyes sprang open, startled, surprised. He'd seen people kiss, in both art and in person but he'd never wondered about it. It seemed vaguely foolish to him until he felt the soft, barely there contact on his own mouth. It was nothing like what he'd imagined. Hands rose and gently touched either side of his face and Deseem felt his own lips soften from the tight worried frown that he'd been wearing for so many months.

He didn't know what it was that his husband would do to him but he had some expectations. Deseem had expected to be stripped bare and naked and to have a stranger's hands touching him, tainting his skin with the roughness of his touch. In his mind he expected to be trapped, pinned down and hurt and he didn't know how but he knew it was going to really hurt. As the wedding had tumbled down on him and the days to this moment faded away, he'd somehow overlain the experience of his father beating him with what his husband would do. Something violent, something that would leave him shivering in pain and feeling broken in more than body but nothing in his thoughts had prepared him for such a soft touch to his face and the gentle brush of his mouth to someone else's.

Liam had some form of a plan in mind. He could be gentle and careful but efficient. He could get them aroused, with someone that had never been touched or never experienced any sexual pleasure, that shouldn't be too difficult. Once the fire of desire was sparked between them, he'd do his best to prepare the boy and if the Gods had any mercy he wouldn't have to explain the process in words. Then it was a simple issue of being as to the point and quick as he could and

from that point on they never had to touch each other again. He could do that, it was a plan like any he'd made during the war and those were far less pleasant to carry out.

Except the mouth he kissed trembled and softened under his own. The plan said that Deseem would keep his lips firm and unresponsive not this shivery uncertain softness that sang of wanting to kiss him back. The plan didn't speak of how the boy's face would feel under his fingertips or the scent of his hair. He broke the kiss and pulled away a fraction.

"Oh..." Deseem sighed, breathy and low and that was definitely not in Liam's plan.

Liam dipped forward again, his hands sliding down to cradle the boy's neck and his mouth brushed against Deseem's lips again. There was no tension in the other's mouth this time, the lips soft and pliant against his own and Liam closed his eyes and kissed him. Each brushing, teasing contact promised something more and Liam held back simply because he was painfully aware that this was Deseem's first kiss. It sunk into his stressed out, nervous mind that this was the first time someone had touched the boy's neck and the thought made his fingers stroke the tender flesh gently.

Deseem was surprised when the strong hands on his neck didn't tighten into a painful grip but instead gently stroked his skin. It made his legs feel weak and his skin too hot and he heard a small, whimpery sounding moan bubble up from his throat. His lips softened even more under the teasing kisses and parted as he sighed.

Suddenly the kiss changed. The lips kissing his own parted as well and things became wet and hot, soft velvet and sharp teasing teeth. It startled him to find the white haired man's teeth lightly nibbling on one of his lips but it wasn't a bite, it didn't hurt and it stole his breath. He complied and parted his lips further and a hand slipped from his neck to the back of his head. A tongue, strong and demanding, slipped into his mouth and tasted of tart, sweet berries. Deseem wouldn't have been able to fight even if he'd planned to, his spine had dissolved now and he was embarrassed to find he was as hard as he had ever been.

The hand that remained on his neck trailed down, over a shoulder. He would have missed the touch, the motion, so lost was he in the taste and feel of the kiss but the fingertips pressed against the soft cotton of his shirt and added small points of pressure and soft warmth. They trailed over his shoulder and down to his back, stroking down his spine to settle fully on the small of his back. There was a small shuffling of feet and a rush of warmth a second before his husband's body was pressed against his own.

Which pressed Deseem's hardness against the other man's leg and reminded him suddenly of what they were doing, what was about to happen and with the reminder he felt shame. "No..." Deseem whispered and pulled away a little. The kiss was gone, the hand that had been stroking the small of his back fell still and the body that had stepped close to his own froze. "I'm sorry. It just...happened."

"What?" Liam asked but Deseem wasn't just looking down, his whole head was lowered. The boy shifted a little against him and it sunk in that Deseem was apologizing for becoming aroused. "You mean this?" He rubbed his leg against the other man's groin and felt the small shiver it invoked.

"I'm sorry." Deseem whispered.

"Let me guess..." He reached up and cupped the down turned face, turning it up so he could at least see the expression there. "They told you to be submissive and modest and this was wrong?"

"Wives shouldn't... wives don't have....I..." His lessons had been vague but the instructors had made it very clear, he wasn't supposed to do anything to remind his husband that he didn't have

the body a normal wife had.

"You aren't my wife." Liam sighed and found himself sliding his thigh against the other man's arousal again. "You're my husband." He whispered the words right against the other man's lips and wondered how many times he'd have to say that to get him to believe it.

Deseem's lips parted as soon as he was kissed again but now he found it difficult to breathe. His body tingled and his breath moved in gasps but with his mouth being claimed, it was almost impossible to get a full breath. It made him feel light headed and unstable and without thinking about it his hands came up and rested on Liam's chest. The touch made him feel grounded, stable and less like he was about to stumble and fall down.

Except the kiss suddenly broke again and a surprised sound was pulled from Liam's throat. Fear swept across Deseem and he quickly pulled his hands away. "I'm sorry."

That was it, Liam was going to have to ban the words sorry and husband from the boy's vocabulary. He reached and gathered up the slender hands between his own. "No, touch me if you wish." But it broke the spell of the kiss enough that he remembered they were in the main room of the suite and while it was unlikely a servant would come in on their wedding night without being sent for, it could happen.

When his hands were tugged slightly, Deseem followed a spike of nervous uncertainty made him want to dig his heels in and refuse. It was silly, his permission wasn't required and while his husband was far kinder and gentler than he'd had imagined a husband could be, he still had to consummate their marriage. The whole reason they'd wed was that treaty and it would not be signed unless he was no longer a virgin in the morning.

Deseem allowed himself to be led by the hand and it felt good to have someone's hand in his own. If that was all the marriage bed was, kissing, touching, he could handle that but he knew from hushed whispers it would be more. Liam took him to the side of the bed and sat down on the edge, he didn't want to disobey so he followed but Deseem had never dreaded a piece of furniture more in his life.

When Liam leaned over again, Deseem felt his body tensing. He waited to be touched roughly, to be guided to lay down. He waited to have a body smother his own in closeness and he braced himself for things, dark, unknown, and horrible to be done to him. Instead, all that happened was another soft, careful kiss. Liam didn't even touch him at first, just a brush of lips to lips and as moments passed Deseem felt a lot of his tension fading away.

Touch returned then, strong hands stroked across his face, across his hair. It was almost too much to process all at once, the feel of the kiss and the feel of those hands gently, softly touching him. He knew it wasn't proper for it to feel so good but it did, as the hands brushed across his shoulder it felt good. Even as the hands wandered down his sides and tickled a little, down over his ribs to settle on his back, it felt good.

There was only one reason why Liam would even want to touch him and Deseem waited for the current series of kisses to break before he pulled away slightly. "Husband?"

"Hmm?" Liam found himself following, kissing the boy's face, his jaw, back to the little valley below his ear and he liked the slight gasp that drew from him.

"You don't...oh..." Teeth nipped his ear and it made his body shiver. "You don't have to be so....I'm ready..."

"Deseem..." Liam paused and whispered in the ear he had been teasing. "I promise I will not make you endure this a moment longer than necessary, if you find it unpleasant. Not every man enjoys the touch of another man."

"If my hus..." Deseem found his words stopped with finger tips pressed to his lips.

"No." Liam stopped him and locked eyes with those haunting amber. "Honesty, you must be honest with me. Do you find this unpleasant? I can be as brief as possible if you do, you can close your eyes and it'll be over as soon as I can."

He closed his eyes now, unable to stand to see those dark blue. "It is...it is not unpleasant. I...I'm just..." No one had said to him that his husband would ask him things and want him to be honest. "I'm scared." He finally answered.

Liam grinned a little. "I'm scared too, I didn't want to marry any more than I bet you did."

Golden eyes glanced up and stubborn determination glowed in them. "I will make you a good wife."

"Let's deal with tonight first and tomorrow we'll figure out the rest. Okay?" He felt so much older than he was, being the one with experience in far more than just the bedroom. Surely his new husband had desires and ambitions to something other than being a wife and tomorrow Liam would try to draw him out.

Deseem nodded and the amber eyes dropped down again. Those eyes had haunted his memories and his nightmares, for years and to see them before him again was chilling. He owned this boy, owed him more than could be expressed or known. Tonight he'd make things pleasant, enjoyable. Tomorrow, once the treaty was signed, he would do his best to help the boy build a life in his new kingdom. It was a small thing he could do to repay him.

"Take your shirt off." Liam requested in a whisper.

Slender fingers paused for only a second before Deseem caught the hem of the shirt and lifted it up over his head. Green lifted away and black heavy silken hair cascaded down against olive skin. He leaned over and claimed another kiss, Deseem seemed to be fairly comfortable with kisses and slowly Liam added in touch. It seemed impossible that no one had ever touched the other man before and Liam touched him with that innocence in mind.

Fingertips as gentle as a whisper, as soft as a thought brushed Deseem's skin. The touch had felt good with cloth between them but it felt a hundred times better directly on his skin. He'd never have guessed that a careful touch to his shoulders would inspire pleasure or the feel of a careful hand trailing down his bare arm could make him shiver. When those hands slipped back up his arms and to the back of his shoulders to wander down his bare back, Deseem found himself almost arching into the contact, almost begging for more.

Was this what people didn't wish to discuss? Was being a bride, a wife, under the touch of a man a shameful thing because of the pleasure? Would a real woman fight against it, try to deny it? Or was he just extraordinarily lucky in his new husband? Was this supposed to be an act of pain and violence, one of taking as he'd been told and he was just lucky enough to have a husband with a gentle touch? He didn't know but those hands, bare on his skin, made him feel immodest and he knew he was failing as a wife by making his husband worry about anything other than his own pleasure.

The kiss broke and Deseem felt himself gasping for breath. Kisses returned to cover his face, his jaw, his neck and that forced soft, hushed, sighing mews from his throat. How could something so simple as the press of another man's lips to his neck feel so good? It had to be improper, he should be trying to please his husband but instead he sat there, on the edge of their marriage bed, shivering in pleasure as tender hands circled his waist.

"Husband.....please....oh....let me....tell me how....to....to pleasure you...."

"Your pleasure pleases me...." Liam sighed against an ear. "Let me...I...I want to make this nice for you...." Liam let his hand trace up the too skinny ribs and just to see how the other man would react, he let his thumbs trace over the already hard nipples.

"Oh!" Deseem shivered, his entire body arched forward into the touch. The white haired man kissing his neck and shoulders chuckled softly but there was no malice in the tone. He had to bite his lip to hold back more gasping moans as those skillful fingers rolled his nipples gently and sent shockwaves of pleasure across his body. Worse, his manhood was aching in a deeply painful way. Could he call it his manhood now that he was a woman and wife? He didn't know but it hurt, he wanted to touch it, to rub it and then it occurred to him; if his husband's hands felt so good on his chest, how much better would they feel lower?

"You're so responsive..." Liam whispered but without thinking he spoke in Trade.

All Deseem heard was a gentle tone and no anger or disappointment before the kisses moved lower. They burned over his collarbone and to the hollow of his throat. The kisses turned wet and hot as his husband nipped and licked his chest and Deseem was again startled by how physically good it felt. Until that hungry mouth replaced a teasing hand and closed over his already tormented nipple. He lost all thought then, heard himself gasping in hushed moans as a fever of delight filled him. So lost was he in the unexpected pleasure, that he didn't feel himself arching into the contact or notice that Liam gently lowered him back and down onto the bed.

That should have set off a feeling of panic or unease but it didn't. A warm body pressed into Deseem and while there was some weight to it, he didn't feel smothered. He felt pinned in place, caught in the moment but not trapped. Something rigid and far too hot pressed into Deseem's thigh and it took a moment to understand. When he did, he blushed but didn't struggle.

White hair, long and soft of down, fell across his chest. It tickled as a counter point to the wet intensity of the mouth tormenting him. Carefully, Deseem let go of his grip on the bed sheets and let one hand drift up to touch the stray strand of hair. It was soft and fine, like a puff of cloud.

Liam stopped and glanced up but the hand quickly dropped the strand he'd been toying with. "It's okay." He turned his head and let the bulk of his hair shower down across the slender chest. "You can touch it."

"It's real..." Deseem whispered.

"Yes." He held still and watched as the hand cautiously returned, touching his hair a little more boldly, trailing fingers through the length.

"I've never seen...I'm sorry."

"Touch as you will...ask me about it tomorrow...after..." He couldn't say, after I've finished deflowering you, but the thought had him rubbing his cock a little against the boy's hip. It got his point across and Deseem nodded only this time when Liam returned to carefully touching and kissing the boy's beautiful skin, a hand gently teased his hair.

Carefully, softly, Liam stroked the boy's stomach, low down across his waist to where his pants hung but Deseem didn't seem to notice the gradual progression lower of his hands. Liam found the tie to the cotton pants and easily loosened the bow. He should give more warning but whenever Deseem started thinking, started remembering where he was and what he was doing he folded back up inside his shell and Liam had to start back slowly again.

He carefully kissed back up the slender body, back to find the spots that had seemed to please Deseem the most as he slipped his hand just under the fabric of those loose pants. It was a matter of timing and as Liam's hand slipped low enough to be noticed, his mouth again claimed

another kiss. Then his hand was there, gliding over the sticky dew of Deseem's desire, surprised by just how aroused the other man was. Deseem arched as Liam curled his hand around his length and Liam devoured his startled moan with a kiss.

Liam broke the kiss and pulled away enough to watch the look on Deseem's face. Those haunting golden eyes were closed but his face was open and unguarded. It was beautiful to see such surprised delight. Deseem's hands came up and he covered his eyes and Liam let him hide because the younger man was making no effort now to stop the whimpering moans that poured from his throat.

The tone of the moans took on a desperate, painful edge. Liam hadn't expected Deseem to make it very far in their wedding night without finding release but he hadn't expected the boy to respond so strongly, be so close to release so soon. "Shhh... it's okay... let go, Deseem..." Liam leaned down and whispered into the shell of the boy's ear.

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Home

Snowflakes and Embers

Chapter Twenty

Maybe it was the feel of his breath on his skin or the hushed permission or maybe it was simply the pleasure of being touched for the first time but Deseem arched hard under Liam. He gasped for breath, mewed, and cried out. His hands clenched into tight fists on the bed and his toes curled up. Release, slick and fevered hot glossed Liam's hand and he watched as Deseem's face twisted up in beautiful passion before soothing down to relaxed ease.

He continued to stroke the softening length, slow and gently as Deseem came down from his climax until his hand stilled but continued to hold the soothed flesh gently in his hand. Liam sat and watched to see if shame or fear would creep across the boy's face but when the hands fell away all he saw in the golden eyes was worry.

"I'm sorry." Deseem finally whispered. He glanced down to the growing wet stain on the cotton of his pants and blushed at the hand that still cradled him. Liam just sat there, watching him with something dark and sad in his blue eyes.

"Don't be." He slipped his hand from inside the cotton pants and stepped away from the bed. He was painfully, achingly hard. All he wanted to do was slip his hand, or better slip one of Deseem's, into his own pants and find his own release. If he did that, he would most likely roll over and fall asleep. He knew he was running on nervous energy and would be exhausted as soon as it was spent.

He settled for a few deep breaths and a careful adjustment of his pants. He was still taking long slow breaths as he retrieved a small hand towel from the bathing room, made it damp and heated it. Liam cleaned his hand off and came back to the bedroom, but seeing Deseem

displayed on the bed, just as he'd left him, his skin flushed and his pants open, did little to help Liam remember his control.

"Here..." he offered the damp cloth to where the boy lay. "Being sticky is not pleasant." He tried to give the boy a comforting smile but it was met with wary distrust. He stepped away from the bed and moved to pour some wine. It seemed cruel to take the boy, like when his sister had tossed Liam into a swimming pond and left him flounder until he figured out how to float. Deseem knew as much about his own body and sexuality as Liam had about swimming and he was about to throw the boy into the deepest parts.

Liam poured the deceptively strong honey wine into two glasses. He'd happily let Deseem take him, that seemed more fair but Lach's note had made it clear that the letter of Bastion law had to be upheld and that law very specifically stated, that a bride was not a wife until the husband spilled his seed into her flesh.

"Stupid law." He muttered and picked up a plate of cut sweet fruits, cheeses and berries. He juggled food and wine and came back to the bed. Deseem had barely moved, he'd sat up a little but that was about it and he'd discreetly placed the damp cloth on the floor by the bed. "Wine." He offered one of the cups and wondered if he was trying to get Deseem a little drunk or himself.

"Thank you." He accepted with a small bow of his head.

Liam sat on the edge of the bed and placed the plate between them. They sipped their wine in silence, Deseem's eyes stayed lowered and Liam found himself looking everywhere but at his husband. It didn't miss his notice that Deseem didn't touch a bite until after Liam took the first fat berry.

The wine didn't last long enough and Liam felt it go right to his head. Deseem finished his in a short quick gulps as if he was afraid to have anything past Liam. That might not have been a good idea, the wine was far stronger than it seemed and it wouldn't do to have the boy get drunk. Liam sat, stalling, trying to figure out how to proceed forward.

He stood up and gathered the now empty glasses and placed them and the fruit on the bedside table. "That's what men normally do....when their....when they're aroused." Liam finally broke the silence. He couldn't look at the bed and instead busied himself with checking the various glass containers of oil. Some were obviously for massage, scented heavily and more floral and a massage might not be a bad idea. It would relax Deseem for certain and get him more accustomed to touch but Liam dismissed it. He didn't want to confuse the boy by mixing casual, comforting touch with sexual when he was so inexperienced. He glanced over but Deseem was still glancing down. "Instead of waiting...most men, if they have no access to a lover will...will touch themselves." He drew a breath and squared his shoulders. "Even with a lover it's sometimes more convenient to... to resolve the issue on your own." He prayed he wouldn't blush trying to explain masturbation. "You really never have touched yourself?"

Deseem shook his head. "I would not lie to you, my husband."

"I'm sorry, I wasn't accusing you." He sighed and rubbed his eyes. The break and the wine had given him his control back and pushed some of the need away so there was no real point to stalling.

"Husband?"

"Yes?" And wasn't it just cute that he was responding to the title like it was his name.

"There is more...more that must be done tonight...isn't there?"

He wanted to lie. "Yes, there is."

Deseem understood. His husband was stalling, either because he found the idea of Bentan unappealing or, impossibly, out of pity and kindness to him. The man had been gentle and given him pleasure when he didn't have to and now he was delaying further to offer Deseem a chance for a break and refreshment. Maybe it was the wine but he didn't wish to have his husband linger in the uncomfortable silences simply to wait and give Deseem some time. There wasn't enough time in the world but he knew his duty as a wife.

Liam glanced up as the slender body moved. Legs gracefully pulled up and slipped around to the edge of the bed. He watched as the boy stood up, his pants still damp but retied, his shirt discarded and forgotten from earlier. Liam watched the golden eyes flick up and dart away and something about how the boy moved carried weight and seriousness so he stopped mucking with the oils.

His fingers shook a little but Deseem untied his pants. Loosened, they dropped easily from his hips and he stood naked in front of his husband. He couldn't look up but he heard the other man's breath catch and felt his eyes like a fire on his skin.

"Husband, do what you must to make me your wife. Please." Deseem whispered and hated how his voice broke on the last word.

What fragments of control Liam had found dissolved and his erection from before returned with a fierce rush of fire. It wasn't just that Deseem was beautiful, underfed but his skin was flawless, his body beautiful to look at, but the sheer courage it took to do what he'd just done awed Liam. That was more attractive to him than any amount of exposed skin.

He had to swallow hard to remember how to speak. He wanted to kiss Deseem, touch that beautiful skin but he ached with want and this wasn't an ordinary night time romp. This wasn't about sharing pleasure, or sharing a bed, where if Liam lost his control and came too soon from a touch or kiss it meant little.

"Get back on the bed, Deseem." Liam whispered but the sound felt louder than if he would have shouted. He watched as that slender body moved and made no effort to hide any nakedness. "Lay on your back." As Deseem settled on the bed stiffly and moved to lay down. He shut his eyes tight like a child hoping that if he closed his eyes, the monsters under the bed would go away.

Liam moved carefully and reached around where Deseem lay to gather up the multitude of extra pillows tossed around. The servants must have expected an orgy for all the candles, flower petals, pillows and wine. Not that he was going to complain, the last thing he wanted to do was find no suitable lube waiting and have to send for a servant and explain what he needed.

He gently touched the side of Deseem's thigh and ignored how the boy flinched at the soft touch. "Lift your hips, I want to put some pillows under your back." He had to explain because the amber eyes stayed shut but Deseem obeyed and Liam slipped the soft pillows under the small of the boy's back. Liam had to pat the boy's hip and gently guide him back down or else he was betting Deseem would keep his hips raised until he grew exhausted and collapsed.

His hand lingered on the soft skin of the too skinny hip bone. "Deseem..." he wanted to explain that what men did together could cause injury and pain if done improperly and more, not every man responded the same. He wanted to explain about how normal lovers would take time to learn each others likes, dislikes and reactions before proceeding but he couldn't do it. "Try to relax and remember to tell me if I hurt you."

He waited, his fingers gently stroking the tender skin that had never been touched before but Deseem neither spoke nor nodded. The amber eyes stayed shut, the body laid out before him stayed tense. It made Liam a little sick at how aroused he was, when this was obviously

something dreaded and unwanted for Deseem. A monster or not, there was no choice and Liam was just grateful he found men attractive. At least that saved them the embarrassment of asking a Healer to help encourage things.

Liam slipped from the bed and even his movement didn't change how Deseem lay there, still, flat, tense, waiting to be taken and used like a proper Bastion bride. There was no point to stalling any further and he doubted he could talk Deseem into helping undress him. He always liked that, the feel of a lover gripping his clothes, pulling them from his body in their need to be as close to him as they could get. It was a different feeling to strip himself bare and know his lover wouldn't even open his eyes.

There were several good oils placed close to the bedside and Liam picked one with a slightly lavender scent. Not only was it a pleasant smell, one that was soothing, but also slightly medicinal too. The oil was slick enough without being greasy or runny and would work fine. He moved it and placed it on the floor where he could reach down and retrieve it.

He just couldn't bring himself to get down to it with no warning and besides, if Deseem was half as tight as he'd been his first time, they were going to need some serious attention to preparation. Norlan had almost refused to take him that first night but Liam had pleaded and pointed out it was his wedding night and the man had given in. They'd have no choice for Deseem but Liam was going to see there was as little pain as possible. Somehow he doubted touching the other man in such an intimate place would do very much to soothe his nerves or relax him, Liam was going to need a distraction.

Liam eased back onto the bed and ignored how Deseem's shoulders hunched up a little more. He traced the lines of the younger man's face, he brushed some of the thick dark hair back. It was nothing they hadn't already done but now they were naked and on the bed and this time they weren't stopping. He leaned down and brushed his lips against Deseem's mouth only now it took a few soft kisses to get the younger man to open his mouth. Gently he added touch in, running his hands freely over the slender body, down to his hips, up over his belly and ribs, stopping to tease his over sensitive nipples before moving on.

The gentle treatment soon had the kisses between them deepening and Liam would have smiled a little at that. If nothing more, he'd taught the boy that when being kissed and touched at the same time, the kisses should deepen. Slowly, Liam settled down on the bed next to Deseem, lying for the first time against the boy naked skin to naked skin. They fit together nicely and Liam liked the way they felt naked together. When Deseem filled out a little more it would be perfect and he pulled his thoughts away from that line. Odds were Deseem wasn't even kree and once he had some time to settle in and adjust to the ways of Corena, he'd give up the whole wife nonsense.

He broke the kiss but Deseem's eyes were still clenched shut, his body still tightly wound in nerves but his hands weren't balled into white knuckled fists any longer. When he kissed the wonderful line of Deseem's jaw, the boy tilted his head granting easier access to his neck. If they were simply two people, even strangers, Liam would have been happy to kiss and touch with the raw hungry need for contact until they both found release but he couldn't do that and Deseem didn't seem like he wanted to touch him in return.

It didn't matter, Liam had a plan and as he gently touched and kissed all the exposed skin, golden almost as much as the boy's eyes in the candle light, he managed to draw soft gasping breaths from his husband. By the time he'd worked his way back down to the bare chest Deseem was no longer as tense as a frightened bird and while his legs, arms and shoulders began to loosen and soften, other areas of his anatomy were growing noticeably firmer.

He felt a little like a lecherous old man when he slipped his hand between Deseem's legs and lightly, carefully, fondled him. Slender hips arched a little up into his hand and the gasped breath sounded more like a hushed moan but Liam stayed with the plan and kept moving slowly

downward. When he stopped kissing the boy's ribs, it went unnoticed so lost was Deseem in what Liam's hand was doing to him.

That was according to plan and very gently Liam brought his mouth lower and kissed his husband in the very best way. As his hand stroked downward, his mouth followed and it was Liam that closed his eyes now. It had been so long since he'd been with anyone, he'd really missed it without knowing he was missing the contact. He'd kept himself too busy to think, too busy to be lonely or crave touch but it rushed back to him now.

Deseem's eyes popped open with a startled gasp as something wet and hot and indescribably wonderful engulfed him. Even seeing the source he didn't believe it, it was like his mind simply refused to process what his eyes were taking in. Only as Liam's hand slipped up his length and he actually watched his own member emerge from his husband's mouth. It made him shiver and the liquid pleasure of this kind of kiss had him shamefully hard again.

Then he remembered the first man he was to be married to, the one that had wanted to be there when they took him to be cleansed. The one that wanted to make it clear he was useless but for how much closer it would bring his husband to the crown and for the pleasure that could be taken from his body. He remembered how that man had called a servant over and how it had seemed that the servant's head had bobbed down into the man's lap. Deseem understood now and it was wrong that his husband would pleasure him in that way. It should be Deseem slipping his husband's length into his mouth, trying to please him, not the other way around.

Liam slipped the now swollen and aching length from his mouth and glanced up, licking his lips and he smiled at the startled wide amber eyes watching him. "Deseem?" He questioned just to make sure he hadn't broken some horrible Bastion taboo or that his husband wasn't about ready to panic at being so intimately pleased by another man.

"I..." Deseem's voice broke. "You shouldn't...I should...I...God protect us..." It didn't help that his husband stayed so close to his groin, his lips a little puffy from kisses of all sorts and all Deseem could see were those dark haunting eyes and so much spilled white hair.

Liam knew enough of Bastion culture to know the god comment was something mindlessly said and not a whispery statement of panic. "I enjoy this... lay down, relax... it'll be over soon." He promised and waited until Deseem nodded and laid back down before he picked the oil up from the floor.

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Chapter Twenty One

Deseem's thighs were closed tight and Liam had to pet them, stroke the lean legs to get them to part. Then it was a few inches only and he ended up having to be a little more forceful and nudge

the boy's limbs to get them to creep open wider. It made him feel bad because of the obvious reluctance and uneasy vulnerability it forced on his new husband but if just parting his legs was an unwanted task, what Liam still had to do would be down right traumatic.

He moved to kneel between Deseem's legs and was struck by how utterly hairless the other man was. Far more than Liam found really attractive and to a highly unusual degree, he filed the concern away to ask Jan about because a man with hair as thick and dark as Deseem's should have some body hair. Not that he was going to complain over it, it was just odd and his mind was too well trained to notice things that others would over look to really dismiss it.

Deseem gasped again as Liam took him back into his mouth, only this time he let oil slick fingers wander between the boy's legs. The legs on either side of him writhed a little but Deseem didn't try to pull away and his hips stayed still on the pillows. Until Liam's fingers slipped far enough back to glide higher and across his entrance, that made Deseem hiss and pull away which shoved him deeper into Liam mouth. He caught the jerking hips and kept himself from gagging by sheer force of will but he didn't remove his slick fingers.

As the touch lingered, Deseem again relaxed and settled back upon the pillows under his back. His eyes were shut tight again and as Liam began to carefully circle the tense entrance he wasn't sure he could actually take Deseem without hurting him. He added a little pressure but the boy stayed tense. He gave it a little time, touching with steady soothing circles but made no progress.

"Deseem, you have to try to relax or I will hurt you." Liam sighed and glanced up the boy's tense body. "I'm sorry we have to do this, I am, I...but please, I don't wish to hurt you. I know this feels odd but relax and allow me to touch you." He didn't stop the steady touch of his slick fingers and whether Deseem believed his words or not he obeyed and with a carefully sighed breath Deseem forced his body to relax. "That's better... there you go... shhh...stay at ease...that's it..." He pushed a little and his finger slipped into the boy's body.

Deseem whimpered a little but didn't tense back up and didn't pulled away. Liam felt his own arousal dissolve a little and he knew he was a monster. He was basically raping the boy all for the sake of peace which was a wonderful foundation to place it on. What difference did two people's refusal make when faced with the chance of open conflict again? He forced another finger into Deseem's body and was grateful when there was no startled whimper this time.

"That's it... shhh... I know... it's uncomfortable... I know..." He whispered. "But Deseem...I have to....I have to...and I'm bigger than a few fingers....this will help, I promise..."

When he couldn't bare to watch the frowning, unhappy face, and the tightly closed eyes any longer, Liam bent back down and tried to bring Deseem's cock back to life. Most of the desire had gone from his own length as well but he had no hand to spare to stroke himself. He'd have to though before trying to take Deseem; he was many things, but he wasn't the sort of man to enjoy hurting his lovers or to get off on their misery.

Except as he slowly glided his fingers, the hips below him wiggled again and Liam glanced up to find not horror or pain but Deseem with one hand over his eyes and another over his mouth. It wasn't pain or horror but the look of one desperately trying not to show how pleasurable an experience was. Just to check, Liam used a little more force and widened his fingers and instead of moving away, Deseem twitched toward his hand and a small muffled moan escaped from under his hand.

His guilt was soothed somewhat and Liam added a third finger. The tightness was easing but it was still going to be risky. If Deseem resisted, even slightly, he could easily badly hurt the boy. It was a sad thing indeed, that Bastion law would rather have him injure and rape his bride rather than give them the time to consummate the marriage naturally. It was a sadder thing that Liam would hold the boy down and rape him if he had to, if that was what he had to do to get that treaty signed.

Another moan broke that line of his thinking, this one sounded more needy and Liam figured he should stop with the sensation overload unless he wanted Deseem to come again before they actually did more. Worse, if Deseem did come, Liam knew he might as well. He moved a little, using his own legs to widen Deseem's and the boy didn't even notice. He sat up a little and as his husband's length left his mouth, he earned a needy sigh but the plan had worked, there was nothing soft or frightened looking about the boy now.

He gave it a little more time, adding a little more oil. The only sounds in the room were their own shortened breathing and the occasional small, muffled moan from Deseem. There was a point where Liam was fairly sure he could make things work without too much pain and where if he waited too much longer his own desire would be too strong and his chance of being careful and gentle would be limited. He needed, he ached and if he didn't find release soon he was going to snap.

Gently he removed his fingers and used the oil to stroke his own length before he laid down between the boys legs, stretching out on top of him. For the first time their lengths met, hot, hard, and slick with the oil between them. Deseem arched trying to rub himself against and into Liam while trying to look like a submissive accepting wife. It made Liam smile a little.

"Deseem..." He whispered but made no effort to move the boy's hands from covering his eyes or mouth. "Deseem... I'll be as gentle as I can..." He didn't want to warn that it would hurt a little and frighten him into tensing up in anticipation so instead Liam just guided himself and pressed against that tight, very tight, entrance.

It took a little force, a little pressure but Deseem remembered what he'd told him and stayed relaxed. Normally Liam would go slowly, start with shallow thrusts, wait for his partner to adjust before moving deeper but Deseem was so tight he wasn't sure he could stand that. He moved slowly but didn't stop the gradual taking. Fragment by fragment he slipped into Deseem's body, his breath gasping, shocked at the tightness.

He'd never been with a virgin before, at least he'd never taken a virgin before and Liam was nearly blinded by the intense pleasure that made his skin shiver. He kept pushing slowly, ever more slowly, forward and ignored the soft gasping breaths from the body below him. Until he was as full and deep as he could get and his body stilled, hanging there, shivering, his nerves screaming at him to move, to drive into that fiery heat and drive them to release.

He forced his eyes open but there was no amber eyes to meet his own. Deseem's whole arm was tossed over his eyes but the hand covering his mouth had drifted down to rest on his own neck. The lips were tight pressed and frowning and Liam knew first hand how that first taking, even with care and prep, caused more pain than pleasure for the first moments.

"Breathe..." Liam whispered as Norlan had whispered to him so many years before. Deseem, like Liam had, was holding his breath. "Shhh... it'll pass, I promise, just breathe..." He was trembling now, needing to move, needing to take the boy hard and deep but still not wanting to hurt him.

Deseem took a long trembling gasp of a breath and then another and Liam held on for as long as he could but with a groan he gave in.

"Oh... oh..." Deseem moaned as Liam slipped from his body but the sighed moan turned into a sharp quick breath as Liam pushed his way back in.

He was moving now and couldn't stop. If Deseem sobbed and clawed at him, he couldn't have stopped. Finishing was too important, beyond his own pleasure and release, the act itself was too important. Liam tried to ease them into it gently but he needed too much, wanted too badly and Deseem wasn't sobbing in pain or trying to escape him.

Liam leaned up a little, his hands settling on the lean hips and he shifted the angle slightly. It was subtle and he moved them a little every few thrusts, trying to find the right angle, hoping to bring the boy back to full arousal, hoping still to try to give Deseem some pleasure from their joining.

“OH!” Deseem’s entire body arched but Liam held him still driving in, aiming for that angle again. “Oh... God have mercy... oh...” Deseem cursed and Liam watched as the hand that had been idle on his neck began to move. His new husband may not have the experience or boldness yet to touch himself during sex, to find the spots he liked teased and add to the experience, but he had the right idea. His fingers traced his collarbone, the line of his neck and back again as Liam gave in and really took the boy as hard as he wanted.

He was close, Liam was dancing a knife edge of his own release but Deseem was fully aroused again and he knew the boy would never be able to get the courage to touch himself. It took a bit to muster the thought and coordination to get his oil slicked hand around the boy’s length but when he did it only took a few, hard, deep thrusts and matching strokes before Deseem moaned again, deep and rattling and came.

There was no way Liam could stand up against the sight of Deseem finding release. The boy arched and writhed, his skin flushed, he moaned and his body gripped Liam so hard his vision paled. It was beautiful, it felt amazing and if the situation were different, he could happily see himself taking the beautiful young man again, over and over, for years and never growing bored. He closed his eyes and let himself go, spilled himself deep in his bride’s flesh as Bastion law required and his bride was so consumed by his own release that he doubted Deseem even noticed that their marriage was consummated and complete.

Liam slipped away and sat down on the bed, his weight held back on his arms. They both were panting for breath but Liam felt exhaustion claiming him. He had no reserves left, he was going to need weeks of rest and full meals to get his strength back and less than a week of stress and worry weren’t enough. He’d held on long enough to do what he had to, as always it seemed, and now all he wanted was sleep, a nice breakfast and some more sleep.

His legs felt wobbly but he got off the bed. The damp towel was cold and Liam was going to the bathing room anyway. It was easy to flick the towel into the basket for used laundry and got a fresh, hot one. He made it steaming hot and quickly cleaned up. They’d been given so many towels that there was no risk of running out so he got a fresh one and yawned on his way back to the bed.

Deseem hadn’t moved but his breathing had grown shallow and his body had relaxed. It took Liam a second but he blinked and saw that Deseem was half asleep and it made him smile. He wouldn’t have to feel guilty now about simply stumbling into bed and falling asleep. The steamy hot towel did little to rouse the boy and Liam did his best to take care of him.

There were flower petals from the ones scattered on the bed caught in the masses of dark hair and Liam left them. He yawned again and gently lifted the slender hips to slip the pillows free and Deseem muttered like a sleepy child. Liam pulled the covers all the way back and managed to angle the boy’s legs under them. Deseem sighed and stretched out a little, his eyes fluttered open but quickly fluttered shut as if they were too heavy to lift.

Liam wanted to crawl in beside him but habit and training had him putting the towel away in the bathroom and making sure he knew where everything was. His sword wasn’t in the room, or his weapons in general, the servants wouldn’t have moved those and Liam would have to in the morning. Baxter was over at Lach’s so there was no need to check water bowls. He was too tired to use magic to puff out the candles and instead moved around the room and puffed out most of them. As he went he gathered up their discarded sleeping clothes and placed them on the end of the bed, just in case, but he was so exhausted he was feeling sick now and didn’t want to bother redressing. Besides, how would Deseem feel to wake up in bed with a stranger, still nude while the stranger was safely dressed? The boy already had a twisted idea of his place and that

wouldn't help.

The petals under the covers were annoying, they tickled his skin but Liam was too tired to remove them. The bed sheets were chilly and he was too tired to waste even a thread of power and focus to heat them. Luckily the bed was soft and the covers heavy and as he stretched out and warmed up, he was sound asleep.

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Chapter Twenty Two

Deseem woke in a dim room and was confused for a moment. He'd been sleeping wonderfully, deeply, dreamlessly and most of all restfully and he woke confused as to where he was. Until he felt that he was naked and his body was sore and there was a ring on his finger. He was married, had been married and he'd survived his wedding night. He was laying naked in his marriage bed and was no longer an untouched virgin.

That thought made him blush. The things his husband had done were nothing he'd expected. Carefully he stretched out and rolled from his side, to his back and then over to his other side, testing his body and he found it shockingly whole. Some of his muscles were sore but he didn't feel bruised or beaten. His bottom was sore too, aching a little but it wasn't even really a pain just a discomfort and he didn't even feel he needed a Healer. The pleasure had more than been worth the tiny amount of pain he was left with.

In the dim light he found the source of that pleasure. Liam, his name was Liam and he didn't want to be called husband but that was just totally wrong. It was, without any doubt in Deseem's mind, the man he'd helped free from his father's torture. The face was gentled now in sleep and looked younger than the night before but it was the same face. There was no mistaking those eyes or that white hair and it was such an odd random turn of fate that Deseem knew God's hand had a part in it. Maybe it was only because he'd saved him years earlier that had gentled the man's hand, made him kinder than husbands were. It was a small mercy God had given him and Deseem quickly prayed a pray of thanks. He hadn't helped the man with any hope of future reward but like some morality tale taught to him from older times his kindness and mercy to someone made helpless had come back to grant him kindness and mercy while he was made helpless. How long that would last, he didn't know.

Liam, his husband, had said they would discuss things tomorrow, after the treaty was signed, after they were fully wed. He trusted that and pushed it aside, they'd discuss it or not as his husband willed. Tradition suggested, but didn't require, a husband take his new bride at least three times in the first day to ripen her flesh and train her to his desires. The idea that the white haired man sleeping beside him may follow that tradition no longer held such fear. He was sore and it would hurt more to be taken again while sore but he doubted a man so careful and gentle the first time would grow rough and cruel the second. If his husband desired him, he wouldn't

even shiver in fear now.

Then the thought occurred to him, this man, this other man, had grown hard and aroused and put that hardness into Deseem's body. It was frightfully intimate, something foreign had been put into his body and his husband had spilled his seed deep in his flesh as was expected of him. Something of his husband was in him, part of him, as Deseem's blood had been mixed with wine and made part of his husband. It felt powerful and strong and made him really feel like he had been made into a wife, not just a bride. He belonged to this man now, the sleeping man's hands and mouth had claimed his body and he'd made him a wife. It made Deseem shiver but there was no dread, just acceptance.

It had, he was willing to admit, felt very good to be touched. Normal wives and brides grew up with their mothers and sisters and knew what it was like to even touch hands or embrace but Deseem had never experienced that. It had felt good, very good. His husband's hands were a little rough and warm and he'd been careful and gentle and shown Deseem not only that touch was pleasant but that it could feel really amazingly pleasurable. And kissing, he'd caught priests breaking from a kiss but he'd never been kissed and no one kissed more than softly where others could see. Kissing was nice too, it made his lips tingle and being kissed elsewhere was even better. Even with his husband in him, being taken, that had been painful but not horribly and then become sinfully, almost unbearably pleasant and nothing like the pain and horror he'd expected.

There was little doubt the credit for that was in the man, not the act. Deseem was smart enough to know that indifference and roughness would have turned the night into something filled with pain. His husband was under no obligation to even ask his permission to do as he willed to Deseem. He could have stripped him naked and forced his manhood into his body with no care or warning and Deseem could guess at the pain that would have caused. Only his husband had been kind, and gentle, and tried to pleasure him when pleasure hadn't been required or expected. It was the man not the act and if he could draw conclusions about his new husband from the act, he'd been married to a good, kind, and gentle man.

The white hair would take some getting used to. Deseem reached out and touched a length of it that spilled across the pillows. It was so fine, abundant but fine and soft. It wasn't just Liam's hair but his eyebrows and eyelashes too. On the man's arm, tossed out in sleep, Deseem saw a fine, light dusting of white hair. The bit of the man's chest that peeked from the covers had more of the fine, sparse white hair. He'd made the comment that his hair was unusual for his people but still, here he was, a young man with all his hair a chalk white.

He tried to judge, now that he was free to really look at his husband, if he found him attractive or not. People had referred to Deseem as pleasing to look at or pretty and he knew his sister had been considered pretty as well but Deseem had little frame of reference. Asleep, without the look of worry in his eyes and the tight frown of unhappiness tugging at his mouth, Liam was pleasant to look at, even with his odd coloring and far too pale skin.

It didn't really matter. He was lucky that his husband was a younger man and not unpleasant to look upon and more, seemed to be a kind man but he knew it didn't matter. He was wed now and more, had been claimed as a wife. This was his life and he would try to be as good a wife as he could manage. There was no turning back, if he was turned out by his husband, he had no home to go to. His brother would be obligated to kill him for shaming their family and failing, no doors would open to him, and no one would shelter him.

"I will be a good wife." He promised in a whisper as he settled back down. He wasn't sure he could sleep again, now that his thoughts were stirred up but as his body relaxed and sleep clawed him down.

Knocking, a soft, almost apologetic rapping, on the bedroom door woke Deseem up. He startled

from a sound sleep, a little confused as the cobwebs of sleep instantly dissolved and dreams faded. As he blinked and the small aches and soreness in his body returned, he remembered where he was and what had happened. He glanced around as the soft tapping came again, looking for his husband.

He found Liam by the far side of the bed. Already awake and moving, his pants pulled on over his hips. He glanced back at Deseem and brushed tangled white hair from his face. "Stay there." He said in Bastion before switching to Trade and raising his voice. "Yes, stop already, I'm awake."

He had been sleeping like the dead, not dreaming and deep and had planned to continue sleeping a not dreaming deep sleep for hours more. The knocking annoyed him, he was supposed to be allowed to sleep in, he was technically on leave that bordered medical leave to rest and recover added in to the fact it was his wedding night, they should know to leaving him the hell alone. Liam left his shirt off. He planned on crawling back into bed as soon as he shoed the pest away and maybe get those few more hours.

"Yes?" He asked around a yawn as he pulled the door open.

It was one of the palace servants, a young woman and she quickly dropped her eyes and blushed at finding him half dressed. "I'm sorry, sir, it's just, it's getting late and well, there are people here sir, to... to confirm...to see you sir."

He almost pitied her and he wondered how late it was that they weren't waiting for them to send for breakfast before trying to confirm that he'd done his duty. "Some prized breeding sow...." He muttered but spared her the embarrassment and used Clanspeak instead of Trade. "We'll be out in a moment, see them into the main room, make them wait and send for breakfast for us. Tea, I am going to need strong tea..."

"Yes, sir, thank you sir..."

Thank you for not making things any more awkward sir, his mind provided and he nodded and yawned again. "No, thank you for waking us."

"You're welcome, sir."

He yawned again and shut the door. Deseem was just as he'd left him, naked under the covers, his hair wavy and spilled around him. The boy looked like he'd slept at least and didn't look like he was about to faint if Liam said a harsh word. He tried to remember not to scowl or frown at the boy because it wasn't his fault that people had to parade in and confirm that they'd had sex.

"Did you sleep?" Liam asked as he sat on the bed beside the boy.

"Yes, my husband."

He sighed, they were back to that it seemed. Liam couldn't be too annoyed when he saw the bruised suck mark on the boy's neck. "Did I harm you last night? Should I call a Healer?"

Deseem shook his head. "My husband was most gentle and careful and I am well."

"Sore I'd imagine, I remember after my first wedding night, I was pretty sore..."

Amber eyes flicked up and for a moment met Liam's blue before darting back down. "Barely, thank you for your care...."

Liam was almost floored by a whole statement that didn't have the words husband or sorry in it. He reached out and brushed a wavy lock of hair back. "Thank you for letting me be gentle."

Golden eyes flickered up again and Liam wasn't sure what was in them but he bet if he kissed those soft stubborn lips he could have them tumbled back into bed again and Deseem would allow him to use his body again. Liam refused to take advantage of the fact that the other man didn't feel he could say no, even if seeing him naked in bed was a tempting sight.

"There are people here, to...well to confirm that the marriage was complete. I have them waiting but they can wait as long as they have to. We should get up and get this over with. I was told they'd moved some of your clothing here as well as mine, we'll have to find them." He stood up and gathered the green sleeping clothes Deseem had removed last night and placed it on the spot he had been sitting on. "There's time, if you'd like to take a bath?"

"I...I'm not allowed, in case they require an examination for evidence."

"Oh. Well, one right after then." He yawned wider and scratched his neck before staggering toward the bathroom to empty his bladder. If Deseem couldn't bathe and get clean, he wouldn't either if only in protest but he did wash his face to try to wake himself up.

In the bedroom, Liam found Deseem sitting on the edge of the bed, his hands folded in his lap over a pile of embroidered brightly colored fabric, still naked, his eyes down and focused on the floor. "You could have come in, I don't mind but bathroom's all yours." He'd been piss shy when he started training but being a prince made no difference, if he wanted to be a Watcher he had to live in the dorms and that meant getting over a lot of shyness. What little modesty he had left was beaten out of him in the war where he'd not thought twice about the open air privies, often hastily made where dozens of men would line up or squat down and do what had to be done.

Deseem nodded a little and moved stiffly and with short slow steps the bathroom, he again shut the door but not all the way. Liam couldn't tell if the short steps were because he'd hurt the boy more than had been admitted or if it was a learned walk to use small steps and look modest and wifely. He'd have to find out because he wasn't going to let his husband hurt if it could be avoided.

He'd send for Jan while they ate breakfast but he had to dress first. The wardrobe and drawers in the room turned up no uniforms. Lach's doing most likely, a clear reminder that Liam was officially and formally as off duty as a Watcher ever got. Instead he found more of the soft, simple clothing that they'd slept in. He found a fresh pair, in dark, dark navy blue, and quickly dressed. He didn't bother to brush his hair out or shave, they were intruding into his private space and time, and they'd damned well take him as he was.

The bathroom door opened and Deseem stepped out. He was again in a robe like dress, bulkier and simpler than the wedding clothing but with an obvious feminine feel and look to them. He hadn't brushed his hair either and it was still loose, neither had he reapplied the dark kohl lines around his eyes all the people from Bastion seemed to wear. It didn't matter, Liam didn't care if he wore them or not, the amber eyes didn't need the lines to draw attention to them.

"Husband?" Deseem asked as Liam continued to stare. The look in the blue eyes didn't have the fire of the night before so he imagined it wasn't lust or want in them but again they felt inwardly turned, a little sad and quite distant.

"It'll be okay." He said as much to soothe himself as Deseem.

The boy nodded then quickly, and skillfully, flipped a length of fabric up. It caught his hair inside, with a few easy motions wrapped around his lower face. Veiled, somehow Liam had thought now that he was wed to Corena and no longer really Bastion that the boy would give up being veiled like a wife. One night didn't change as much as he'd hoped.

Liam opened the bedroom door and was surprised at the dozen people in his main room. All eyes turned to him and he didn't bother to hide the yawn that took him. Prince Irendorialah stood

a little to the side, several of his people with him and Liam's father stood near him. That was a touch embarrassing and made Liam feel like a six year old again. Malcome was there too and Lach and two other Watcher's Liam didn't know on sight but guessed were Sentinels picked to confirm the marriage for their kingdom. In the back behind them were several Bastion servants and just for good show several of their own.

It was a small circus and Liam had to gather all his control about him to stop himself from rolling his eyes or shouting at them in temper to leave him alone. He walked into the room and heard Deseem following, the Bastion idea of a proper three paces behind, paused and bowed slightly.

"Father."

"Good morning, Liam. I'm sorry to disturb you but we're four hours from the treaty signing and everyone needs to know if we should continue the preparations."

A delicate way of asking to see if Liam had taken his bride and Liam felt himself frowning. He stepped a little to the side and waved to the bedroom. "The room is yours, Father." Liam refused to be embarrassed, he was too angry to be embarrassed but he thought he saw embarrassment in his father's eyes and Malcome looked downright uncomfortable.

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Chapter Twenty Three

He dismissed them, didn't even bother to hear whatever formality had to be said or done between Irendorialah and his father and turned to Deseem. "I've sent for breakfast, it'll arrive when this is finished. Would you like to sit?" He found himself pulling one of the chairs at the table out as if Deseem really was a woman and wondered if he should stop that.

"If it pleases my husband, I shall stand if he does."

Liam nodded and continued to stand. Across the room four people, all with Sight, walked into his bedroom and he was glad Lach his only brother with such magic, wasn't going to be one of the people confirming the marriage. Liam glanced around and found Irendorialah watching him, not the bedroom door for the verdict and more precisely, watching Deseem and the man didn't look happy. Deseem didn't notice, his eyes were again lowered.

One of the Watchers was the first to return to the room, a younger man, one most likely in black since the war. He was blushing a little but held his composure, taking the duty very seriously. The second Watcher, a man old enough to be Liam's grandfather followed him and he wasn't blushing but when he glanced to Liam he grinned a little and nodded. That made Malcome clear his throat.

It was another long, awkward moment before Irendorialah two men returned. They kept their eyes straight ahead and looked serious and formal. They bowed. "My Prince." The older of the pair began. "It is our duty to report that the marriage of your sister is complete."

Irendorialah looked from his loyal men to his sister. "You're certain of this? With no sign of trickery or deceit?" He asked in crisp Bastion.

"None we saw, My Prince."

Irend stood for a moment and locked eyes with Liam. Liam didn't look away or back down but it took control not to shiver. The last time Irend had locked eyes with him, looked at him like that, was when he was bound and captive and facing pain and death. Liam actually had to touch his thoughts to the pulse of his magic just to remind himself it was still there and not blocked by spell, just to remind himself he wasn't helpless.

"Sister." Irend finally said. "Look at me."

Deseem wasn't sure what to do. If he obeyed his brother without permission from his husband, his husband could become angry. If he disobeyed his brother, his husband could see him as troublesome and be angry. "Husband?" Deseem whispered.

"It's okay, do as he wishes." Liam answered and hated the meekness in his husband.

Deseem swallowed hard and raised his chin before slowly lifting his eyes. Irend studied him. It made Deseem wonder if there was some way to see, just by looking, that he was no longer a virgin. Could people tell by so casual an inspection that he'd moaned and writhed under his husband, that his husband had filled him and taken him? Irend's frown deepened and he walked over to where Liam and Deseem stood, his boots loud in the tense silence.

Irend's eyes stayed on Deseem but he spoke in Trade. "Did you find pleasure in my sister?"

"What occurred between Deseem and I is between Deseem and I." Liam answered in Trade.

"Sister." Irend switched to Bastion. "You are quite composed for one claimed. You look rested even. Tell me the truth, your brother and Prince, the one who has sheltered and saved you, is there trickery involved here?" He needed to know. It could very well be a trap, they would arrive to sign the treaty and the white haired monster he'd given his sister to could arrive to claim his bride was defective, useless, unpleasing and the treaty would be cancelled. They'd spend months more negotiating and Irend would have to surrender what gains he'd managed to secure. He needed to know for certain before they were at that moment that Deseem truly had been made a wife and the agreement sealed. "Tell me sister, why are you so calm for one so recently a wife?"

"Enough." Liam snapped in Bastion. "I will not have you badgering him."

"You are fluent in Bastion?" Irend raised his eyebrows but he'd suspected. When he'd asked the others he'd been told Liam spoke some. It seemed he spoke more than some. "I did not know."

"You didn't ask me, I've hidden nothing. Deseem is my spouse now, by your law my wife, I will not allow this harassment or this insult."

"I wish an examination."

Liam almost felt Deseem's sudden fear and he had no Empathy. The boy's eyes dropped again but he made neither motion or sound of protest and quietly accepted that he was about to be stripped naked in a room full of strangers and very intimately checked by several Healers. "No, there will be no examination." Liam answered firmly. "I am a Watcher and Prince of Corena, I

have completed my required duty. Your own men have confirmed it and yet you deny it simply because Deseem is not weeping. Perhaps it is your way to be cruel and hurtful to your brides, it is not ours." He snapped and wanted a fight.

"Liam."

His father's deep voice, soothing and gentle reminded him he couldn't have that fight, that everything they were doing was to avoid a fight. Liam drew a deep breath. "If you were honest and truthful with us and Deseem was as untouched and virginal as you proclaimed so very loudly, he will have no way to lie to you. I will step away and allow you a moment alone to speak with Deseem. If you were honorable and he truly was untouched, you will trust his words. If you continue to have doubts, perhaps I shall have them as well." He stepped away and moved to join his family. Malcome looked worried a little but his father looked a little angry.

"What is it you're doing?" Korin spoke just enough Bastion to have understood the basics of what had transpired.

"Father, you made me that boy's husband and I will not allow him to be any more humiliated than we both already have been. Especially without true cause. Would you have allowed Celeste to be stripped naked and examined?"

Korin was silent for a moment but nodded. "I would have done everything possible to prevent it, yes."

It wasn't quite a full out agreement with Liam's protest but it did grant some measure of understanding. Liam wondered how many years would it take before his family could think of him as an honorable man again. He had been a monster during the war, something horrible and a breath away from having to be put down like a monster should be. There was little doubt his actions had been fully reported and at the time praised but no one liked to think that they'd raised a cold blooded killer and he doubted his family would ever forget his history.

"Thank you, father." Liam managed to answer. He glanced to where Irend was questioning Deseem, the boy's eyes were lowered. Now that he'd really seen his husband he could see how similar the two brothers were. Unlike Liam who looked almost nothing like his brothers.

Irend didn't raise his voice but his hand came up and before Liam even had time to process what he was seeing the man had hit Deseem. The boy stumbled backward, his heel caught the hem of his robe and he fell. Back he tumbled, too tangled in his dress and surprise to try to catch himself and he hit the ground hard.

Liam was across the distance before Deseem even settled and he wasn't thinking. His hand caught the other prince's shoulder and pulled the man around. He swung his own fist at the same time, wanting to, needing to hit the man in kind. Wanting to hit him for the blows Liam had taken and Dorena and really wanting to simply call on his own magic and pull the other man apart. He only barely remembered he was supposed to be an ally now but Liam felt Malcome try to block Liam's own Firestarting and it made it more difficult not to do something stupid.

He hit Irend harder than Irend had hit Deseem and the room exploded. People shouted, some of Irend's men rushed forward to get between Liam and Irend. Lach caught onto Liam's shoulders and pulled him physically back. Liam heard himself shouting but wasn't even sure what he was saying or in what language. Irend pushed forward past his men and swung hard. It was a blow Liam could have easily avoided but Lach was in his way and the fist landed.

He saw stars and stumbled back, Malcome holding him now, trying to block Liam's magic even more. That gave him a new target and Liam reached inside and gathered his own magic close and pushed hard against Malcome. His brother knew he couldn't shield him and yet any time he felt threatened he tried. Liam pushed so hard back that Malcome let go of his arms and stumbled

away as surely as if Liam had hit him. The other Watchers surged forward trying to pull Liam back as he struggled to reach Irend and blood slipped down his face from his bloodied nose.

"Enough!" Korin roared. "Malcome, Lachlin, Liam, enough!" The room fell silent and soon stilled. "I may only be your father by marriage Prince Irendorialah but I would not have my children, including you, rolling around on the carpet pulling each other's hair like children." Irend's men stepped back as the prince regained his composure but Lach kept a grip on Liam. "Now, both of you, if you're going to act like squalling children, say you're sorry and forget about it as if this was a childish fight."

Irend raised his chin and made sure the split lip was open for everyone to see. "I'm sorry, my brother Liam."

"Brother to my spouse or not, know I will not stand by and allow you to hurt Deseem."

Irend glanced to where Deseem still sat on the floor in a tumble of fabric, unbraided black hair tumbled free now and then back to Liam. He inclined his slightly. "Agreed. I am sorry, I overstepped my authority. I should have asked you to discipline her in my stead. I am not yet accustomed to my sister being a wife."

Which wasn't the same for saying he was sorry for hitting someone that was defenseless or for sucker punching Liam while his arms were being held but it was an apology. "I'm sorry I reacted so violently"

"Good, good." Korin nodded. "Prince Irendorialah, are you satisfied to the completion of the marriage?"

Irend glanced to where Deseem sat, amber eyes wide. "I am."

"Excellent. Liam, you are not required to be but both of you are welcome to attend. It is the sacrifice you both make that allows this treaty to become a reality."

Liam nodded. "Thank you, father." It wasn't a commitment to attend or a refusal and that seemed good enough.

"Very well, we've intruded into their private time long enough. Please, Prince Irendorialah, I'd be honored to host you and your men for tea and discussions of our mutual interest."

The group quickly filed out, Malcome still shaking his head and glaring at Liam but Lach remained. "Never a boring moment, ah, Liam?"

He shook his head and was glad when Lach finally let him go. He moved to kneel beside Deseem, Lach going to the boy's other side but Deseem quickly hurried to re-wrap his hair and hide his face.

"It's okay." Liam said softly in Bastion. "Let's get you up, are you hurt?" He looked to his brother. "Give me a hand?"

Lach nodded and reached to take Deseem's other arm and help haul the stunned boy to his feet. His hand closed around Deseem's upper arm before the amber eyes seemed to focus and then they grew wide with fear. When Deseem pulled away, Lach let him go and the slender boy scrambled backward.

"I'm sorry, my husband, I'm sorry."

Liam frowned. "For what? It's not your fault your brother hit you and he deserved to be hit for it, so it's not your fault he hit me back, it's okay really."

"I'm sorry...I'm sorry..."

"What's wrong with him?" Lach asked.

"I don't know, let's get him up."

Again when Lach touched the boy's arm he pulled away, huddling up now into himself and begging for forgiveness. "Lach let go of him." He whispered in Trade before switching to Bastion. "Deseem..." He tried to speak as gently as he could. "Listen to me, this isn't Bastion, we don't cloister people here. I will not punish you if someone else touches you. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, my husband."

Liam sighed because the amber eyes were wide and frightened and didn't seem to believe him. "This isn't a trick or trap or....or some sort of test. I mean it. It's okay. I know this must seem very different to you but believe me, no one is going to hurt you. Okay?" He waited until Deseem nodded. "Good, now this is my older brother, Lachlin, everyone calls him Lach, he's Captain of the Watchers. If you ever need anything and I can't be reached, you can trust and turn to Lach."

"Yes, my husband, I shall obey him."

"No...no not like that...I..." He sighed and cursed a softly in Trade. "You don't even need to obey me, it's not like that here, just if you need anything and I can't be found you can turn to him, like a friend." That didn't seem to register anything to Deseem so he shook his head. "It doesn't matter, we'll get it figured out. For now let's just get you up and see how badly you're hurt."

"Husband..." Deseem reached out and gently dabbed at Liam's bloody nose with the hem of his very well made dress.

Liam caught the boy's wrist and tried to save the fabric. "It's nothing, just messy." He wiped at the blood with his own sleeve and showed that it had already stopped bleeding. "See? Let's get you up."

Deseem nodded and glanced to the other man in Watcher black. He thought they might have the same nose, they both were fairly fair skinned and had similar chins. They could be brothers with same father, one from a first wife and one from a second.

"Okay." Liam said and nodded to his brother. "Should work now, try taking his arm."

Lach did, carefully and the slender boy flinched but didn't pull away and didn't start with the repeating begging again. "Better." He said softly and smiled like he would to a child. "Gods, Liam, there's nothing to him."

"Jan says he's about starved half to death."

"He's still veiled?"

"Haven't really had a chance to talk to him." They got Deseem to his feet and the boy swayed a little but stayed there and let Liam guide him to a chair. "He was begging me not to beat him for letting you touch him."

"That's not a funny joke."

He glanced up to where his brother was frowning. "I'm not joking."

"I'm so glad I'll never be king. I don't think I could do it, make peace with people like that."

Liam glanced from the anger in his brother's eyes to the fear in Deseem's. "Better than the alternative."

"I've got to go get things in order before the signing. You okay?"

"You mean besides the fact that I'm married to a man that acts like a kicked puppy?"

Lach grinned a little. "Yeah, besides that."

"I'll live."

"See you at the signing?" Lach asked but when he opened the door servants with breakfast waited and on their heels was Jan. "Hello, Jan."

"Maybe."

"Lach, good to see you!" She leaned forward and placed a kiss on the side of his face in passing. "Leaving?"

"Yes."

"Say hello to Bekka for me."

"Will do. Take care of them for me."

"As much as they'll let me." Jan nodded.

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Chapter Twenty Four

Lach left as the food was brought in and laid out on the table and Liam still stood looking gloomy. "Father sent for you? Not that my sore nose is complaining."

"Sort of, I was in a side room waiting to be called in case an exam was required. Three Corena Healers, two Bastion, I'm so glad we avoided that." She moved to fuss at Liam's nose.

"Me as well." He batted her away. "I'm fine, check on Deseem. His brother hit him pretty hard." He switched to Bastion. "Deseem, I'll be right back, need to get the blood washed off. You remember Jan from last night right, the Healer?"

Deseem nodded so Liam left to wander to the bathroom, knowing Deseem couldn't really talk to Jan or Jan to him but he needed a moment alone. He wanted to slip out a window and run away like he had as a boy. Only then he'd escape to forgotten store rooms and attics and out onto rooftops, now as an adult he wanted to get miles away. His problems were bigger now so maybe that's why the distance he needed was larger.

He washed his face and winced a little more from habit than pain. The blow had caught his face more than anything and it was tender and sore but nothing close to his idea of pain any more. As he washed drying blood away, he tried to remember how many times he'd actually broken his nose and found he'd lost count.

"Hey, Jan?" He asked, drying his face as he came back into the main room. "How many times has my nose been broken?"

"Huh?" She glanced over at him. "Stop whining, it's not broken."

"I know that, just, I can't remember how many times it has been broken."

"Oh, well, I can see at least four but one of those was when I had to re-break it to get it to heal straight. Can you get him to take off that wrap and maybe calm down? Every time I try he glares at me and I swear it feels like a fuzzy brick wall."

"Is that normal?"

She shrugged. "You do it to me all the time if you're feeling stubborn. I can push past it but I didn't want to give him a headache."

"Huh, you never said anything."

"Happens, stubborn, strong willed, focused people can do it."

"Deseem? Jan is a Healer, there's no worry about modesty. Very few people in Corena are veiled and you don't need to be veiled for my sake, it'll be your choice. She needs to check you over so if you could help her? Relax a little and let her see where you were hit?"

Deseem sat still a moment before he moved and unwrapped the cloth from his face and hair. The wavy thick black length spilled forward over his shoulders but he kept his head down.

"Better." Jan said and she smiled as she pulled a chair over. Very carefully she reached a hand out and tilted Deseem's chin so she could see the growing bruise on his face. "Whew, he did crack him, didn't he?"

"Didn't even make a sound when he was hit. Jan... can you make sure I didn't hurt him, he says not but..."

"Of course."

He stood still and silent and waited. Deseem glanced up to him once but the amber eyes quickly flickered away. It took too long to simply fix a bruise but as he watched, the swelling started going down and the redness began to fade.

"There we go, all done." She smiled but Deseem was looking down and missed it. "Your turn Liam." Jan stood and reached to tenderly poke at his own bruise.

"That took a while, did I...?"

"Not even in the least."

"Ow." He pulled away, she was far less gentle with him than Deseem.

"Baby."

"Why so long then?"

"Liam..."

"What? Is he sick?"

"No, not sick, he's been ill but I don't see anything wrong with him or any signs of recent injuries."

"Old Healings?"

She sighed. "He's been somebody's punching bag, not recently but there's Healed broken bones all over him."

"His brother? Was he the one starving him?"

"How long has he been with his brother?"

"I don't know." He switched to Bastion. "Deseem, how long have you lived with your brother?"

"I'm sorry, my husband, I don't know. Months?"

"Did you leave Bastion with him?"

"No, I...I was with my father and then in a tent with my brother, I believe inside Corena."

"Right away or did it take some time?"

"Right away, my brother, gave me a servant that did something, I was sick. I'm sorry my husband."

Liam felt a little knot of fear twist up his stomach but he kept it to himself. "It's okay Deseem, Jan just wanted to have a reference point to help you feel better."

"Thank you, my husband."

He tried not to frown at the boy but it wasn't easy and he was glad when he turned back to Jan. "Have you heard of Bastion blood spells? Using someone with strong magic's blood as a beacon to someone with Speech?"

"Only stories, legends, the one with speech spills the collected blood of the magic being used and acts as a trigger, something about a symbol of one of the Bastion god...not much."

"I think they Fetched Deseem from his father. His brother was already inside of Corena when he arrived in his care. Is it possible to Fetch a living thing that far?"

"Well, because the Speaker as the trigger would go with them, it would make the people being moved really sick and more than likely would kill the Fetcher or fry his mind. It would explain the illness without my finding anything wrong. His brother really must care for him."

Liam snorted a little. "His brother really needed this treaty and he needed his brother to seal it."

"So cynical."

"It's true."

"Okay, but still cynical."

Liam nodded to Deseem, the boy still had his eyes down. "He knows it too. So was it the brother?"

"No, most of those breaks are years Healed. The starvation was low level for years and if he's only been in his brother's care for a few months, I'd say it couldn't be from him."

Liam rubbed his eyes. "So what do you recommend?"

"Well for one, I recommend you hold still and let me take care of this."

He sighed but let her brush her hands across the painful bruise on his face and the soreness of his poor half smashed nose. "Thanks." He muttered when she let him go and the pain had faded.

"Now, for him? Food, good, healthy food, rest, fresh air, and a chance to live where he isn't being slapped around. He's young and relatively healthy, I see nothing to say if they did Fetch him that it had any lasting side effects. He'll bounce back with time and care. You, I'm recommending to Lach that you be placed on medical leave for at least two weeks. I don't even want to see you running or over practicing jung-jo or anything for those two weeks. You're going to sleep and eat and read a book and not even think of using those Talents of yours until you've got some strength back."

"Jan..."

"Don't! Two weeks, we'll look you over again after two weeks. You've been running exhausted for a while and we both know it. I saw that you collapsed after that last storm on the coast and that you were out for three days. Medical leave, then we'll see about getting you some honest work around here since you'll be staying for a time. Being inactive for a while won't hurt you any, it'll give you two time to settle in."

"It's not going to be like that."

She patted the side of his arm. "You don't know what it's going to be like yet."

"Jan..."

"I'm going to go, let you two eat breakfast while it's still hot."

"Jan..."

"Call me if you need me." She smiled at Liam and smiled wider at Deseem and quickly left the room.

Liam sighed but the head ache that had been forming was gone, chased away by Jan's Healing. "How about some breakfast? Jan says you're underweight and need to eat more."

"Thank you for allowing me to see a Healer, husband." Deseem glanced up before he stood up. "May I pour tea for you?"

"Only if you pour for yourself as well, and no need to thank me. Anytime you aren't feeling well, there's plenty of Healers around here." He watched the too overly careful way Deseem placed poured tea from the pot into the cups and how he placed the fruit and cooked oats in front of

where Liam had been sitting before moving some closer to his own place.

"They're signing the treaty soon, would you like to be there?"

"If it pleases you."

"Deseem, it pleases me for you to make a choice. I think I'll go, you're welcome to as well or to stay here. You must be tired." He sipped at the hot tea and noticed it wasn't until he'd taken up his own cup that Deseem took his first sip. He waited and watched and Deseem didn't touch his food until Liam took his first bite.

"If I may, I'd like to go with you."

"It's settled then." They ate in silence and it wasn't until Liam finished that he thought to ask. "Do you like dogs?" He'd have to retrieve Baxter soon. The dog was clingy and would soon start to fuss and give Lach trouble. The last thing they needed while Bekka was pregnant was a huge, whiny, homesick dog to deal with.

"Husband?"

"Dogs, do you like dogs?"

"I don't know. I've never been near one, but if it pleases my husband, I'm sure I'll like dogs just fine."

"I have a dog, Baxter. Norlan gave him to me after our wife died. He's a big thing but well trained. I'll introduce you to him later." He sighed. "Deseem, we need to talk about this relationship."

Deseem placed his cup down and his stomach clenched around the warm fruit and oats he'd been eating.

"Here in Corena? We don't own our spouse, I view you as my husband. I don't want you to obey me. I know neither of us would have picked this but we're here. I'd like to think you can build a life here and be happy. I'll help you as I can, I hope we can become friends, with time. You don't have to dress as a wife or stay veiled unless you wish it. I'm not going to be angry if you look at me or talk to someone else or touch someone else." The words weren't as eloquent as he wanted them to be but he was tired and his shoulders felt knotted up and the headache Jan had chased away was threatening to come back. "Do you understand me?"

"Yes, my husband."

It was like slamming his head into the wall. "Alright, if you want to see the signing we should get cleaned up. Do you want me to call for a servant... do you... I know Bastion custom has servants help with dressing or the like..."

"I can manage, thank you husband."

He'd tried to tell the boy he wasn't property, but he couldn't beat it into him and it was a very real possibility that thinking he was property, had been beat into him. It was just a matter of giving it some time to see if he'd relax a little bit, once he understood that Liam wasn't going to be using him or hurting him every chance he got.

Liam leaned over and plucked a crush flower petal from the loose dark hair. "I'll start some bath water for you. I'm just going to take a quick shower."

Deseem sat where he'd been placed and watched the way his husband's hands tenderly stroked

the flower petal between his fingers. He touched the petal with the same care he'd touched Deseem the night before. It seemed almost too much to hope that his husband really was a gentle, good man. As Liam walked away, his odd, long white hair still loose and tangled from the night, swayed and Deseem wasn't sure what he felt.

His stomach growled and he was surprised that he not only didn't become sick from eating but that he was hungry. His husband hadn't returned and he hoped he wouldn't mind since he'd finished his own breakfast and left the table. Deseem risked it and finished his cooled cooked oats and most of the stewed fruit and downed another cup of tea before moving to get cleaned up. He had to get ready, he wanted to see the treaty he'd bought for his brother be signed and made real.

With his stomach full, Deseem stood. He gathered their breakfast dishes and placed them back on their tray. After months in the palace, he was used to the patterns and habits of the servants and knew someone would be by to collect it. Only difference was he was loading and unloading the tray not one of the eunuchs.

There was no way he'd allow any of them into the room. He owed that much to his new husband in repayment for his gentleness. Irend had made it quite clear that the servants, he was going to leave with him, were going to be his eyes and ears in the palace. People with latent magic that could learn things maybe they shouldn't, people like the man left with him before, ones capable of more than they seemed.

He'd refused, politely, but refused and Irend had hit him for it. He'd known when he said no he was going to get hit, his father would have beaten him unconscious for the denial but Irend was a little more controlled. There would be an ambassador sent back to Corinth, Irend could smuggle his spies in with that group if he was so set on the idea. They'd be checked over more and that was why he wanted to just leave them with Deseem.

That wasn't going to happen. He was answerable to his husband now, no one else and while he wouldn't betray his brother to tell his new husband about the spies, he wasn't going to allow the spies either. He would clean the rooms himself, do without the painted lines around his eyes, dress and bathe himself and tend to everything alone before he allowed a spy to betray his husband. The man could have hurt him and he hadn't, he could have let Irend beat him and he hadn't. He was a wife now and he knew his loyalties were with his new house.

The breakfast tray loaded, Deseem moved to the bedroom. It still smelled of honey, fruit and flowers. Light was creeping in from what he guessed had to be windows and Deseem moved to open them. Only to find that behind the fabric wasn't a tall window but a pair of mostly glass doors. They looked out onto a garden filled with sunshine and large old trees. It was a pleasant surprise and it spilled in sunlight and cheered the room. Deseem wasn't quite smiling as he moved about the room to find clothing but he didn't feel smothered and so trapped either.

Water was running in the bathing room and Deseem almost turned around and left. Liam was naked under the falling water of the shower, his back to Deseem and white hair wet and stuck to his skin. His feet froze in the doorway and steam billowed out the door and into the bedroom.

The night before came rushing back and Deseem felt himself clutching at the light fabrics he was wearing. He liked how it felt against his skin and he remembered laying naked with this man. The memory was vivid, he had writhed and moaned and hungered for every touch. Then they'd been naked together, Liam as trembling and hard as he'd been, moving together, moaning together. Now here they were, alone again, Liam undressed and wet and pleasing to look at and Deseem stood frozen in the doorway with something hot and fluttery in his stomach.

Liam glanced over his shoulder. "It's okay. Guess it is kind of scandalous, but I've been naked with too many men over the years to worry about it and we are married and that really didn't come out right. I mean, I've nothing that you don't have and you've seen me naked already so

you may as well come in."

Deseem shut the door and was grateful that his husband looked away before he saw the blush that crept across his face. He slipped the veil from his head and hair and glanced around to find a place to put his clothing. He spotted the low bench and the tub filling with water. On a narrow table were sponges and soaps, oils and powders and Deseem picked over them, looking for the soaps he'd grown used to while staying at the palace. He'd actually grown quite fond of the Corena water showers as the servants hadn't figured out how to fuss over him while washing that way. Even with the smaller bathing tubs, they still tried to wash him and that had been annoying.

He glanced up and Liam was still facing away from him so he quickly loosened the ties and hooks of the dress and let it fall from his body. Normally he'd leave it there, knowing a servant would pick it up even before he stepped too far away but he had no servants now. Now he moved quickly to gather it up and drape it with the veil, half feeling like he should cover his nakedness with a hand just in case his husband turned around.

He didn't and Liam didn't. Technically Deseem was naked around other people every day of his life since he'd been born but that was different. They were servants and he'd felt no modesty around them. Liam's blue eyes were different, even fully clothed they made him feel fevered and oddly immodest. He had no right to be modest under his husband's eyes. If Liam willed it, he could have him naked and under his gaze anytime he wished. That didn't mean he didn't happily turn off the streaming water to the tub and stick a foot inside just to avoid his husband turning around and seeing him nude.

The water was almost painfully cold. Not even chilly but outright cold and it made a shiver go across Deseem just from having a foot and leg in it. His husband had drawn his bath and he had made it cold. Deseem would deal with being cold, even if he was already shivering as he lowered himself down into the cold water. Behind him the water shut off and Deseem quickly dropped down all the way into the icy water just to be out of sight when Liam turned around.

"Oh, don't..." Liam grabbed a towel and wrapped it around his waist. "I didn't mean for you to get in while it's still cold. Here..."

Deseem glanced over his shoulder, shivering now harder, his hair a wet cold mass floating on the surface of the water. Before he could say that the water was fine, it began to heat around him. Soon it wasn't even cold or even comfortable but hot. Steam rose from the surface and he stopped shivering.

"Too hot? Not hot enough?"

He sighed. "It's perfect, thank you my husband." Magic, he had to remember his husband had magic but Deseem wasn't used to seeing it used casually.

"Just a little trick, run cold water in the tub, hot in the shower, heat the water in the tub so we both have plenty of hot water. Didn't intend for you to slip in so quickly, caught me off guard. Water's easy for me, traditional Firestarters have trouble with it but with having Waterseeking too, takes just a thought." He snagged another towel and rubbed as much of the water from his hair as he could. When he had it mostly dry, he tossed the towel toward the bin and just magically pulled the majority of the remainder of the water from his hair. "I'll be..." He forgot for a moment what he was going to say when he glanced to the tub. The boy looked like a water nymph with his hair floating around him and steam swirling around the top of the tub.

Amber eyes opened and started up at him, wary and bright. "I'll be out there, will you require a servant to help you dress."

"No!" Deseem shook his head and dropped his eyes. "No, my husband, thank you."

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Chapter Twenty Five

Liam nodded and quickly left the room. Maybe he should have run the tub hot and the shower cold. He needed time and distance between last night and seeing the boy floating naked in the tub, at least more than a few hours or he was going to embarrass himself. The night before would have been much more difficult if he didn't have kree tendencies but the rest of the days and nights that were to follow would surely be so much easier if he had none. He shook his head and focused on getting dressed, dress uniform not court formal and he took a lot of his frustrations out while brushing his hair.

Liam wasn't surprised when Deseem joined him in the main room still dressed as a Bastion wife but he was surprised the boy had no lines under his eyes. The lower half of his face was veiled as well as his hair, on his feet were the slippers Liam had given him during their wedding and the only jewelry was the ring that matched Liam's only.

He glanced up from where he'd been writing a letter and placed the pen down. "Ready?"

"Yes, my husband."

"Good, afterwards we can go gather up Baxter, let you meet him. Do you like these rooms? We can pick out another suite, most likely best to stay on palace grounds but the garden out there.... It's not overly popular and it has an entrance from the Watcher grounds, so I'll be able to come and go pretty easily. If you don't like these rooms, there's plenty others to pick from."

"Whatever pleases my husband."

"Deseem if I didn't want your thoughts, I wouldn't ask."

He stood and considered it but he liked the view of the garden from the doors in the bedroom. He liked that the set of rooms had space but wasn't massive. "I'm fond of these rooms, my husband."

"Then here we stay. I'll see to it the remainder of your things are brought over. Say, do you have any hobbies? Anything you'd like to do? Any goals? I can arrange just about anything..."

"I wish to be a good wife and please my husband."

Liam resolved himself to having a lasting headache. "Of course. Well, let's go so we're not late."

The ceremony was boring and Liam found himself standing and not listening. Not really, anyway, but he was far from distracted. He used the time to check over himself and feel out how exhausted he actually was. Like stretching sore muscles, he gently expanded the part of his mind he connected with his magic and tested how strained it felt. Heating water was easy, removing water from wet hair took almost no effort, breaking up a storm, ripping the ground open, making trees splinter and explode that took effort. He wasn't sure he could do that now, he felt drained dry, hollowed out.

The treaty was signed with great flourish and many loud proclamations of friendship and peace. Gifts were exchanged and bells rang but Liam didn't feel it. He had spent too many dark long months on the border fighting, killing to have a piece of paper and a husband end it all. His wasn't the only less than joyous face. Plenty of the Watchers and Guard officers looked wary and weary and uneasy with only a hint of hope around the edges. Like Liam, they had faith in their King and Queen but didn't trust Bastion as far as they could throw them.

Liam stayed to the side, Deseem the proper couple of steps behind him and that alone rubbed him the wrong way. After the treaty was signed people came over to wish them well, Watchers, nobles, Senators and the like but Deseem never glanced up and didn't speak, even if Liam tried to engage and include him in the conversation. It made their well wishers uncomfortable and they quickly hurried away.

It made him doubly grateful when Bekka came over, rubbing her lower back and smiling. "Well you look as moody and frightful as always, so I assume things are going well?"

"As well as can be expected." Liam agreed. Bekka had been kind to him when he'd been returned from the front lines broken in body and spirit. Everyone had warned her he was a madman and dangerous but she'd taken her cues from Lach and not even blinked twice at sitting by his side. He just hadn't been capable of even trying to get to know her and that was a regret now.

"Baxter misses you, I swear that dog is more clingy than a child."

"He's a little spoiled."

"Which just proves what a good uncle you're going to make to this butterball here." She patted her stomach. "Too much of his father in him, kicking me in the ribs all the time."

"Do you know, is it a boy?"

"I haven't asked and Lach doesn't want to know. He likes not knowing something for a change, you know he can't see much about people close to him. So not knowing is a novelty for him."

"Mind if we come by and collect Baxter after this?"

"Not attending the luncheon?"

"No, Deseem won't be able to eat with the veil and really we ate way too late. Thought I would get Baxter and show Deseem around a little. I've heard he's been pretty much kept in their rooms."

"Celeste and I tried to invite them to tea but the offer was rejected outright. He doesn't say much does he?"

"Not so far."

"Brother!" Irend declared loudly and came over to where Liam stood, two men following dressed in the simple clothing of servants.

Liam found himself frowning a little at how easily the man ignored the fact that he had been speaking to Bekka. "Excuse me." Liam said to his sister-in-law and nodded a little.

She just smiled a little in an understanding way and stepped away.

"Brother, let me make this gift to you, two fine servants, well trained, altered to be secure and safe to attend to my sister, your bride. You may trust them with her keeping, they will secure her for your pleasure only. This is the offer I make to you, please, accept it."

The idea of two Bastion servants hovering around made his stomach turn over. Prince or not, he'd been raised to be take care of himself and maybe it was because he was a prince of the royal line and by default treated like everyone's little brother, while growing up, but he valued his privacy quite a bit. Then again, it wasn't quite fair to Deseem, who had been raised to accept and rely on servants to have him go without. Corena servants were skilled and could learn many things but even Celeste, who was as fussy as a princess could be, required little from a personal maid.

"I..." He glanced to Deseem and the boy raised his amber eyes. The look there wasn't one of want or hope or need but of fear and this time it didn't feel directed toward Liam. "I am honored by your generous offer." Liam finished and trusted that he'd read the look right. "However, it's too generous. I am Corena, not Bastion, I have no desire to keep my spouse cloistered. I trust that Deseem was raised to be honorable and honest, even if not chaperoned and I would never dream of depriving you and your household of two such well trained servants."

"Really, brother, I insist, allow me to do this for you."

"I can not accept, it is too generous, what with how you have gifted me with such a beautiful and well trained bride? Already, I am over come by your kindness." Liam managed to smile but it didn't touch his eyes and most of the pleasantness in his voice had faded away. He was ready to tell Irend to piss off if he pushed again.

"My son will muddle through with the efforts of our own staff, I'm certain." Korin laughed and clapped a hand against Liam's shoulder. "Please, come, enjoy the lunch we've made ready in celebration and there shall be a play afterwards, in your honor."

His father's voice was light but when Irend turned away, Korin gave Liam a hard, questioning look. He would have to remember to explain later or else his father would think he was simply being stubborn for the sake of it.

"Liam..." Lach asked as he escorted Bekka back over. "Would you walk Bekka back to our rooms, since you're getting Baxter?"

"Of course."

"Three seafood courses, I'm sure it will be politically improper for me to vomit at the luncheon." Bekka smiled. "The thought alone makes me nauseous."

Liam grinned. "Of course."

"Another month of this, I swear if we have another child the Healer's will have to figure out a way for Lach to carry it."

"Yes, dear." Lach smiled in a happy goofy way and kissed the side of her face. "I'll be back as soon as I can."

"I know." She patted Liam's arm. "I'm in good hands."

Half way back to their rooms Bekka sighed. "Does he have to follow behind like that?"

"Apparently, yes."

"I'd kick Lach in a place that would really, really hurt and limit our chances of having a second child if he made me walk a couple of steps behind him."

"I'm not making him walk behind me, I can't get him to walk beside me."

"Hmm."

"It's been less than a day, give him some time."

"Deseem? Do you like dogs?"

Liam translated, listened for the hushed whisper and switched the words to Trade. "He doesn't know, he's never been around a dog before."

"Oh my and Baxter is quite the dog! I grew up around dogs, mother used to raise those little yappy fluff balls."

Liam translated as she went, only half thinking about it.

"Baxter's a good boy. Do you think he'll be jealous? I swear that dog is smarter than most people."

"I don't know, he doesn't like most of my lovers. He'll behave."

When they reached the suite of rooms Lach and Bekka shared, Liam let her open the door but he heard whining almost as soon as she touched the door knob. "Hush you, hush, he's here, you big over grown baby!"

"Heya Baxter boy, you miss me?" Liam called out and clapped his hands and the massive dog whined and cried and nearly knocked him down, rushing over so hard. He had to crouch down and let Baxter roll against him, his tail whipping with stinging force. As he scratched the floppy ears the dog whined and growl talked, chewing him out for leaving him with babysitters. "I know, I know....silly thing." He rubbed the wiggling dogs belly and thumped his side. "Here now, come on, want you to meet someone."

"You talk to him like he can understand you..."

"Who says he can't? He's about the only one that ever listens to me, aren't you boy?" He patted the huge dog and glanced up and behind him. Now that he was crouched down he could look up and see Deseem's eyes and the amber rounds were wide. "It's okay." He said to Deseem. "He won't hurt you. Hold out your hand and let him sniff you..." He patted Baxter's side again and stood up. The dog was well trained with both verbal and hand signals and Norlen had been clever enough to make the hand signals subtle. No one ever noticed him using them but Baxter never missed them. He signaled Baxter to be calm before letting him go.

The large dog circled Deseem quickly, sniffing at the hem of the fancy robe like dress, snuffling up a hidden leg and down to sniff at the slippers Deseem wore. Liam never could swear how Baxter judged people but he'd learned to trust the dog's opinions on them. Most of his lovers the dog was bored with, disliked or flat out ignored and he waited to see which of the three categories Baxter put Deseem into.

Very carefully Deseem lifted his hand, presenting the back of his fingers for Baxter to sniff and the dog happily snuffled over the boy's hand. A pink tongue flicked out and Deseem's hand flinched a little surprised but Liam caught a small flash of a smile cross Deseem's face. The veil hid it but it flickered to his eyes before fading away.

"Baxter don't lick." He scolded but lightly and switched to Bastion. "You can pet him..."

Carefully, Deseem reached out and let his finger tips slip across the dog's skull. Baxter's tail took off like a fiend and he wiggled and pranced in place but still remained calm and careful as Liam had ordered. The dog's response made Deseem bolder and he fully rested his hand on the large head.

"Baxter likes him!" Bekka grinned.

"Well now, maybe I'll be the jealous one." Liam grinned. Deseem was still petting Baxter like he might break but it was a start. "Do you like him?" Liam asked his new husband.

"I've never seen a dog so large." Deseem whispered.

"Well, he's a big breed and Norlen picked the biggest one he could find. He's well mannered though and I'll teach you the commands to get him to behave. Not everyone is a dog person, wasn't sure how you'd take to him."

"He's beautiful, my husband."

"If you play fetch with him, he'll love you forever." He glanced up to where Bekka stood with a knowing smile on her face. "What're you grinning at?"

"Nothing, just you're smiling. I don't get to see you smiling a whole lot."

He was smiling, seeing Deseem not cowering in fear was pleasant and more, seeing Baxter like his new husband was even nicer. "Will you have someone bring his things over? We're going to stay in that suite."

"Right away, Lach thought you might like it there. No one uses that garden anymore so Baxter can romp and really it's a stone's throw to Watcher grounds."

"It'll be fine and Deseem likes it there. I'm happy to sleep outside on the ground, a bed is an interesting luxury anymore."

"Oh, Liam, it's good to have you home. I'm sorry for the situation but it'll do Lach a world of good to have you near by, he misses you so much, worries about you." She came over and kissed the side of his face and pulled him into a hug. "Try to be happy, okay?"

"I'll try."

"And you!" She smiled at Deseem and pulled the boy into a hug. "You're family now so welcome and if I can help get you settled in here in any way, let me know, okay?"

Deseem went as rigid as if he was worried she would slip a knife in his back during the hug. Golden eyes looked to Liam but remembered his husband's promise that it was okay to be touched by others now, and Bekka was another wife and he wasn't going to be a priest but it still sent a shiver of fear down his spine. Liam quickly translated.

"Thank you." Deseem whispered.

Liam passed the message on. "Thanks, Bekka, we'll get out of your hair now, you get off your feet and rest."

"Oh you're no bother..."

"I'm going to show him the library..."

"Sounds... dull and unromantic..."

That chased what smile he had away. "This isn't a relationship requiring romance."

"Liam dear, every relationship should require romance."

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Chapter Twenty Six

He shook his head and made his goodbyes and soon they were out in the hallway, Baxter following at his side and Deseem behind him. "You'll have to forgive Bekka, she's pretty impulsive. Lach told me, their first date they ended up fighting and she threw the dishes from dinner at him. I don't know her too well but from what I've seen she means what she says, she'll help you settle in all she can. Do you like to read?"

"I...I used to..." Before he'd been partially cleansed reading had been his only pleasure. He'd tried since but the words swam and made his head ache.

"Corinth has the largest library you'll ever see. We've the largest collection of books written in Bastion outside of your kingdom. Not just dry educational books but religious texts, poetry, fiction, legends, you name it. I wasn't the most popular of trainees, I practically lived in the library. Don't worry, you don't need to know the way here yet, any servant can guide you over and see you get back to our rooms, any time you want to come over." He was talking now just to fill the silence and it wasn't a trait he liked. He'd used to do that when he'd felt uncomfortable as a boy, as if he could figure out the right words to make people comfortable around him.

"There are these hallway tunnels, two from the palace grounds, one from the senate and one from the Watchers. Each hallway has a different theme and color, see, this one is on the responsibility of a ruler." But Deseem didn't raise his eyes to look at the frescos, carvings or stained glass of the long hallway. People passed them but while they inclined their heads slightly in deference to his rank no one stopped and bowed or made a fuss. It confused people who didn't know their ways and they saw it as a lack of respect but inside Corena any Watcher received a bob of the head and nothing more, even if the Watcher was a prince as well.

"We won't go in, the librarians frown on Baxter stomping about, even with how well behaved he

is. We'll come over later once you're settled in and get you registered. Even a prince has to official check out a book to remove it, we all take it very seriously." He'd stopped them in front of the massive wood doors.

The doors were always open, always. They were fifteen feet tall and seven wide each and a good half foot thick and yet the solid stone entranceway was wider and thicker still. Carved on the inside wood of the doors was several names, etched into the otherwise smooth wood and instead of being removed the names had been polished and made part of the door.

Deseem glanced up slowly from the stone of the floor. Sunlight floated in golden beams through the wide open doorways. He blinked at the bright light and couldn't believe what he was seeing. He stepped closer and the room spilled out in front of him but really calling it a room was unfair, the building, the hall, the cavern. He hadn't ever seen a building so large before.

He moved to the threshold of the large doors and just lifting his eyes wasn't enough. Up the building climbed, he counted three, four, five, six, seven balconies above the main floor, all wrapped around a central open space that soared up higher to a glassed in domed roof. It was large enough that sunlight spilled in and would through out the day, filling the space seven stories below that had neat lines of tables and chairs.

The center space was huge, around the outer edge were wide thick columns and Deseem guessed they were set at least twenty paces apart and he counted twenty five columns around the open center circle. The building was massive, huge, mind boggling and everywhere Deseem looked was rows and rows of book cases all filled with bound volumes. Without knowing how far back each level extended, how deep the rows went, he was already awed and he had the feeling if he knew how big the building really was he'd be struck speechless.

He knew his mouth was hanging open but he hoped the veil covered that. It wasn't just the books, people were everywhere. Plenty in Watcher black, most with the gray stripes on the uniform and very young faces so he took them to be trainees but mixed in where people in fine clothing. Men and women, he saw, women dressed in pants, their hair and faces uncovered, unescorted, moving about like men, it suddenly felt like too much. The library was too large and made him feel like he couldn't breathe. It was too much and things were too different and he wanted to go back to his room and not leave it.

"It's impressive isn't it?" Liam stared around the building and felt his shoulders unknot a little. The warmth of the sunshine, the silence of so many people focused on their own research, the smell of the old books and dust, even how the ancient stone and wood felt to his magic after being reinforced and protected by so many Watchers over so many centuries felt good to him. "Largest collection of books anywhere I'm told. There are wards on it to prevent most magic from working inside, eight floors up, five below. The doors have only been sealed twice in all the centuries, once when the Dreamkiller invaded and the second time when Brigshia invaded. Watcher Morin stopped the Dreamkiller within that first day and they unsealed the walls but Brigsha had control for years." Liam ran a hand down an almost invisible seam in the stone outside the door. "The librarians pulled up rock, sealed the wards, locked themselves inside. Forty two of them died in here protecting this knowledge. Can't blame them for not wanting Baxter romping about." He grinned but Deseem looked over awed.

"Don't worry about it now, when you're up for it we'll come back. I'll show you how to look up and find the books you want, get you set up to log out books so you don't have to stay here and read."

"Yes, my husband." He dropped his eyes because he couldn't stand to watch it any longer.

"Fair enough." He sighed. Liam wasn't sure what he'd been hoping for, some measure of excitement or delight, something more than just impressed awe at the size of the building. He loved this place, loved the books that filled the shelves and some part of him had hoped his new

husband would love something of it too. At the least, than, they'd have that in common. "Have to back track some, I want to show you grounds a little." He told himself he was silly for being disappointed, it wasn't like he'd married the boy for love or a relationship. He'd lost all hope of that when Dorena died.

It might have been years since they were boys together but Lach couldn't help himself. When Liam picked up the pace, pushing himself for the last half mile of their evening run, he refused to back down. He wasn't going to let his kid brother outpace him or show him up even if it made his sides burn to do so. Worse, Liam found even more speed, competing with him to dart around the last corner in the garden before stumbling to a fast walk as they finished.

"Masochist!" Lach declared, winded but pleased to see Liam was gulping for air too. "Oh, I'm...I'm too old for this..." He huffed and wheezed.

"You're not too old!" Liam teased back. "You're spending too much time behind a desk. Oh... Lady bless that felt good."

Lach flopped down onto a bench. "Masochist."

"I'm not on medical leave any more."

"Limited, she said limited duty..."

"I'm not going to get stronger lazing about." He glanced over to his brother, winded and red faced. "You're getting soft."

"Maybe... oh....so you going to take over Chandra's Wilderness Survival course for me?"

"In place of combat horsemanship?"

"Along with? I know you said you wanted to keep busy and neither are typical classroom settings."

"More suited to me?" He dropped himself down on the bench beside his brother.

"No offense, you're not a classroom teacher. I'd give you some trainees to mentor but you're awful teaching for separate Talents and no other Elementals have shown up."

"I don't care just keep me busy."

Liam had been increasingly reluctant to go home and Lach had been unsure about prying. It was Bekka that insisted he had to ask. "Everything okay?"

"Fine, everything's fine."

But his brother's voice didn't sound fine. "Liam, this is me. You and Deseem not getting along?"

"It's fine..."

"You never mention him, no one ever sees him..."

"That's his choice not mine!"

"What's going on?"

"He's driving me insane, Lach!" Liam hopped back to his feet and started to pace. The long run had left him tired but the knot of anxiety quickly welled back up.

"It can't be that bad."

"You think? Come here....look..." Liam motioned and got Lach to stand and follow him. They crept across the garden to almost on top of the suite of rooms windows and Liam stayed to the side.

Lach peered in, frowned, glanced to Liam and glanced inside again. He held his tongue until they were back far enough away to talk without being overheard and almost back to their bench.

"What was he doing?"

"Scrubbing the flagstones around the fireplace, for the third time this week."

"He's...what?"

"You heard me. He snaps at the servants, tells them to go away, they think he's accusing them of not doing it right but I've seen their work. It's fine. They came to me with a maid in tears he'd snapped and they'd not understood and he snapped louder. Finally he's shooed them off and clean the whole suite himself. He scrubs the bathroom floor to ceiling three times a week, the fireplace three times a week, the whole suite at least once a week. I'm not that messy, Lach."

"You were always tidy before..."

"I'm worse now but he's more obsessive than I am! He re-ordered my books, not by subject, not by year or use. He put them in order of the color of the leather covers, then by height than if they were the same height and color by width. They're all in there, neatly lined up none too far forward or back, by color and height and width. My desk? He lined my pens up by size, the papers are stacked in perfect order, by size and texture. The curtains? He sewed them. He embroidered the towels. He embroidered Baxter's bed for Lady's sake, Lach! He's driving me insane!"

The expiration and frustration made Lach laugh. "Sounds like you need to take him to bed more often."

"That's not funny, so not funny..."

"You two not getting along there either?"

"Took me almost a week to convince him I wasn't going to use him. Second night we were married? I tell him I'm tired I'm going to bed as soon as I finished some papers. He nods and goes into the bedroom, I go in and he's laying full out naked on the bed, waiting for me."

"No! What did you do?"

"What would you have done?"

"Well...I'm not the least bit attracted to men..."

"Supposing Deseem was a woman?"

He thought about it and sighed.

"If you tell me you would have hopped into bed you're a liar and we both know it."

"I couldn't have, would have been tempted but I couldn't have."

"He's still trying to be a wife, a good submissive Bastion wife. I couldn't do it."

"But you wanted to?"

"I'm moral, Lach, I'm not dead. He's beautiful and gods he was so responsive and seeing him there waiting? I felt sick with myself that I wanted him."

"Did you explain it to him?"

"No, told him to get dressed for bed and went and took some alone time in the bathroom. I still don't even know if he's the least bit kree. He won't speak to me about it, just says he's trying to be a good wife. I'd hoped when he brother left he'd stop this nonsense but he's only gotten worse." Liam glanced over to where his brother was grinning at him. "It's not funny!"

"I'm sorry, it's not but you need to get him a hobby."

"I can't. He won't leave the rooms, won't even go to the library. It was only last week I convinced him these gardens were okay to go out into and that was only because he enjoys playing fetch with Baxter as much as Baxter enjoys it. I brought books in Bastion home for him? He says wives shouldn't read. I have him taking lessons in Trade?"

"Watcher Bishick?"

"Yes, he taught me, he's good, he's not making any headway with him. Deseem isn't even willing to try. He just sits there during the lesson and doesn't look up, doesn't speak. He's listening because he's learning words in Trade but he's too timid to talk to Bishick and he's a good man. I want to shake him. I thought about forcing him to stop wearing those silly Bastion dresses and veils, making him leave the rooms but Jas says all she gets from him when I make him go out is a low level sense of panic. He gives me headaches Lach, and I'm so frustrated and ... and...I don't know what to do."

"And he won't talk to you?"

"I can't even have a basic conversation with him. We eat breakfast in silence, I leave, I have to come back for lunch or he won't eat. Again we eat in silence, I go away and then dinner in silence. I don't think we say more than dozen words to each other all day and when I try it's always the same, I want to be a good wife, my husband." He sighed and rubbed the back of his neck. "I know it's cowardly but it's just easier if I stay away as much as I can."

Lach sat thinking. He wouldn't have believed it if Liam had just told him but seeing the dark haired man in the gauzy brightly colored fabric dress, on his hands and knees scrubbing perfectly clean stones was convincing. "You being frustrated isn't helping, we should take a trip into the city."

That was a euphemism for visiting a brothel. "You're married."

"Fine, you should take a trip into the city."

"I'm not that kind of frustrated."

Lach just gave Liam a sarcastic look.

"Okay, so maybe a little. He's beautiful Lach and if he wasn't Bastion and wasn't so obsessed

with this notion of being my wife and if I knew he was kree....he's beautiful and I'm not dead. It's not that, a hundred trips to the city isn't going to change the fact that he grates on my nerves."

"Could you be on edge because the Day of Remembrance is next week?" He asked carefully. "You haven't been back home for one since...since the war."

Liam glanced up to the first signs of the trees changing colors, the summer had lingered but fall was creeping up on them. "Maybe."

"At least you admit it. Just hang on for another week, get all the solemn mourning aside. Give the boy some time with distance between him and his brother and see if you can't talk to him once he understands things really are different here. Don't give up hope yet."

It was easier for Lach to say, he wasn't sleeping next to Deseem, his dark hair spilling everywhere. Liam wanted to believe that with time and care the boy would come around but he doubted it. From what he'd seen, it was the very differences between their cultures that was repulsing the boy, driving him deeper and further into his ideal of a wife.

He could endure it but working too many hours and training too hard. Soon enough he'd be allowed back on patrol or some impending disaster would call him away. His magic was too valuable to have him sitting at home babysitting a fussy bride and far too young trainees.

"Don't tell anyone, okay?" Liam asked, feeling like a child again. "I don't want Court gossiping about my awful marriage."

"Not a word." He patted his brother's knee and stood up, stretching and popping his back. "I need to go home, get cleaned up before dinner. Bekka's sister is still here helping with the baby and I promised they could have the night off to do whatever it is sisters do together. See you tomorrow." He ruffled the sweat damp white hair and grinned.

"Thanks, Lach." Liam said but he stayed sitting there, alone in the garden, as the air cooled down and the sun began to set, stalling and trying to avoid going inside.

Next Chapter

Story Home

Home

Snowflakes and Embers

Chapter Twenty Seven

Liam hated the Day of Remembrance, lost souls day. It was about the only holiday a Watcher was promised to be found celebrating, the one asking the Death Queen to welcome fallen friends and loved ones home. Names were never spoken aloud, there was no roll call of the dead announced, instead each mourner would drop a blank piece of paper into a fire and carry thoughts and prayers for loved ones lost with the smoke and ash as it blew. It was a time for remember all cared for and gone and Liam found too many names and faces to remember.

More, lost souls day was a time to ask forgiveness of the dead. Not just those loved and lost with words unspoken but those killed in battle. Liam couldn't even remember the faces of the people he'd killed and felt no purging attending the rituals. He would have happily offered to stand guard or some other mindless duty but Lach insisted he go. His brother somehow had it in his head that if Liam went it would make the old pains go away but Liam knew better.

After the rituals and cleansing rights where priestesses of the Death Queen with their silent male consorts beside them dripped blessed salt water on the heads of the mourners, Liam knew he should return home. He was melancholy and lonely, neither of which were good places to be in. The sadness and grief mixed with the reminders of mortality tended to make people gather together and that often led to gathering together alone in strange beds.

Liam had already fended off several subtle offers and one not so subtle, most from women but one was a fellow male Watcher that Liam had shared an encounter or two with during the war. He didn't want to be with anyone and it wasn't out of fear of betraying his marriage. It was just that he couldn't stand the thought of something so empty as simple physical companionship. Especially on a night when something so much deeper and more was high in his thoughts.

Instead he found himself around a fire out near the stables. There were Watchers there and a few Guard officers but most everyone was a Northern Clansman. They welcomed Liam to their circle warmly, as one of their own and none of them tried to sleep with him. They pressed a drink into his hand and let him sit quietly watching the fire burn away as they sang mournful songs to the dead. After a few drinks Liam found himself singing softly along as well, Baxter's head resting heavily on his thigh.

He could have spent the night there and if he'd been single he would have. Liam would have spent the night sitting on the blanket on the ground, just on the edge of the light from the fire. He would drink and sing mournful songs in Clanspeak with the sadness only their songs seemed to carry. When he was tired he would curl up on the ground and sleep or find an empty stall in the stables and wrap him and Baxter in sweet smelling hay and wait for dawn.

Only he wasn't single now. If he spent the whole night out drinking and singing Deseem would sit awake, alone, waiting. He'd sit up and just wait with fearful, sad, amber eyes until Liam staggered in the next morning. Liam would have to deal with that guilt too and he had enough on his conscious already. So after a few drinks, just enough to mellow the memories and pain, Liam made his farewells and made the slow walk back to his rooms.

Lights glittered from the windows around the curtains Deseem had made and hung. The room from the outside looked warm and inviting but Liam didn't want to go in. His fondest memories, the times when he'd been happiest, had tended to be outside. It was outside with the stars spilled out over him that he felt the most at ease and that was never more true than now. Returning to his rooms and his new husband felt like slipping a noose about his neck and everyday made Liam feel more trapped, less able to breathe and tonight of all nights he just didn't want to do it.

He patted Baxter's side and squared his shoulders as he opened the bedroom doors. The dog darted ahead of him, he wasn't having any issues adjusting and seemed to adore Deseem. Liam often envied the dog's good nature and his escape from sad eyes that seemed to cover a total lack of independent thought.

"I'm back." He called out as he latched the door behind him and straightened the curtains that covered the doors. Baxter had continued to the main room so Liam followed.

As always, Deseem stood waiting for him, eyes lowered and moved as soon as Liam was through the door to the main room to take his cloak from him. "Thank you." He muttered as always, itching with how uncomfortable it made him. "Did you eat dinner?"

"No, my husband."

His stomach turned over and he had to stop himself from grinding his teeth. "Deseem we've had this conversation. Whether I return home or not, you must eat. I can't..." He started to snap and caught himself. He wasn't going to point out that he couldn't come home for every meal. "It doesn't matter. Will you eat if I send for something for you?"

"I'm well, my husband."

The boy's stomach growled a little at the mention of food but he wasn't going to eat unless Liam did as well. The thought of food on top of the Iskey punch he'd drunk, mixed with his temper and grief made him ill. "If you say." He muttered and thought maybe reading a little would settle his thoughts and maybe, if he was lucky allow him to sleep.

Deseem's cloth bag with the wood handles he kept his sewing supplies in was next to the chair by the fire that had become his own and as Liam walked by black cloth caught his eyes. He stopped and Deseem stopped behind him. He reached down and knew the fabric by touch. He picked the pants leg up and thin needles threaded with fine black thread. The beginning of a complicated pattern was forming, black thread on black fabric and Liam stood frozen.

This wasn't the sheets, the curtains or the towels and not even Baxter's blankets. This was his uniforms, and while he knew it was just cloth they were his. He'd earned the right to wear black, to be a Watcher. He'd sweated and bled during training and served his kingdom with all his being during the war. It was his. More than his books, lined up by color and size, his uniforms were his. Deseem was embroidering his uniforms and something cracked open inside of Liam as he gathered the pair of pants up into his hands.

"What is this?"

For a moment Deseem's eyes darted from the fabric to Liam but when he opened his mouth nothing came out.

"Enough of this, Deseem! Enough already! I've been patient. I swear to all the gods I've been but this is bordering on absurd. Stop it already! Stop embroidering everything, stop scrubbing everything four times over, stop offering to pleasure me just stop all of it! And don't, just don't embroider my gods be damned uniforms!" He was breathing hard now and clutching the fabric and knew he was drunk but he meant it.

"I'm sorry, my husband, I just wish to be a good wife." Deseem said, barely as loud as a whisper.

"That's just it! You can't be a good wife. Nothing you can do will ever be good enough to please me as my wife! It's not going to happen! All you're doing is driving me insane! Just stop already, stop it before this ridiculous excuse for a marriage is made an even larger mockery!"

"I'm sorry."

He wanted to shout at the boy for saying he was sorry, to yell at him and tell him to stop saying that all the time but he was afraid if he did the boy would scurry away and hide in a corner. Instead Liam just bent and started pulling black fabric from the boy's chair and out of his sewing bag. As he did something rattled and a splash of color rolled from where it was tangled in the dark black of one sleeve. The sound and colors shivered across his nerves and Liam froze.

For a moment he glanced at the bag as if some viper was hiding in it but when he glanced up to Deseem the boy was wide eyed and trembling, visibly shaking in fear. Liam reached into the bag and it would have been better if he'd pulled a snake from it, even a poisonous bite would have hurt less.

The beads were smooth in his hand and the belt slipped easily from the bag, bits of loose thread tangled and hanging. There was no mistaking it, he'd had to learn the patterns and colors before wedding Dorena. Liam ran the belt through his hands, across the beads that marked her Clan, her accomplishments, the ones that marked her wed to Norlen and his Clan, the ones added when she'd wed him.

He couldn't breathe and the room spun a little. Suddenly all the stupidity over embroidered dog beds and scrubbing the bathroom four times a week fell away and Liam couldn't breathe. He glanced to where the dark haired boy stood, his eyes down, and a thousand thoughts and fears poured down in Liam. Was the boy really some trap? There were times during the war when the only thing that had kept Bastion from taking more ground was Liam and his odd magic, with Liam gone a second invasion would be so much easier. Did they know of his instabilities, did they know Dorena had been his wife? Was it all some sick, perverse trap, an effort to slowly drive him back into madness, maybe this time not to escape?

"Why...why do you have this?" Liam's voice cracked but he glared at Deseem.

Deseem stood frozen in place and didn't even try to answer.

Liam dropped his uniform, the embroidery forgotten and snatched at the boy's shoulder. "What are you doing with this?" Deseem shivered under his touch and his eyes lowered to gaze at the floor but he seemed unwilling or unable to speak. "Answer me!" Liam heard himself snarl and shook the boy's slender shoulder. "Why do you have this? Did you keep it? Is it some sick trophy? I've asked you about that day and you refuse to talk about it, why? Do you like to remember her that way?" He shook Deseem harder and found he wanted to hit the boy when he refused to answer and he hated that crazy rage that curled around his heart. "Tell me!" He shouted and forced himself to let go of Deseem's shoulder.

The boy dropped as if Liam had actually hit him. He crumbled onto the ground and a slender arm raised to cover his head. It was the posture of someone used to being beaten and under other circumstances Liam would have felt like a monster. At the moment he only felt panic and pain. The moment blurred and hazed, he was hearing and speaking Bastion and expected to glance around and find Dorena semi-conscious, sick with fever and infection, hanging like an animal at the slaughter.

He stumbled backward. "This was a mistake... I should never... just another trap... of Lady bless and now there's no way out...I'm stuck in this marriage...how could you keep this? Steal this from her? Now your people..." He knocked into Baxter and nearly fell down. "I see your plot now, I understand it and it won't work!" He knew it sounded mad but he couldn't stop it. The belt was a guilty weight in his hands. "I may not be able to break this marriage but I'll be damned before I let your brother's trap bring me down again!"

That was it, he was snapping. He was too drunk and this was too large of a shock. He needed to get away from the room and Deseem. More, he needed to find Jas or Lach and try to keep his mind from falling apart. He was dancing on a knives edge of panic and inside old wounds he thought long turned to scar suddenly had scabs ripped away. He felt as raw as those first days when he was well enough to understand all that had happened, as broken as if he'd never healed.

"Stuck in this marriage until I die..." He whispered. He felt almost as trapped as when he was bound and helpless, facing his death in a slow and painful future. Liam mentally clawed after the reality of his situation and tried to keep the sharp memories in the past where they belonged. It wasn't easy and he kept smelling blood and burnt flesh and he knew he had to get away, not just from his memories and the boy cowering on the floor but from having to speak Bastion. He had to find Lach or Jas and hope they could keep him pulled together enough to figure out everything.

He wasn't thinking and when the curtains over the bedroom doors tangled around his arms he simply yanked. They tore with a rip sound as he flung the ruined fabric back away and would have broken the glass to get out of the latch had stuck. Luckily it didn't and he hit the cool night air, Baxter trotting beside him. He wasn't quite running but his feet were clumsy and he stumbled, tripping over them awkwardly several times. It wasn't until he was almost to the garden gate that he tripped and fell hard to the ground.

The jolt of the impact and the sudden pain of his knees hitting rock painfully startled some of the panic from him and forced his lungs to draw in a long gasping breath. That helped settle him too and the beads pressed into his hands as a physical testament to the present moment he was swimming in. He knelt there, where he'd fallen and the gasped breath escaped in a wracking sob.

"Oh... oh gods..." He moaned and let the trembling, sobs take him. There were no tears, he'd wept all his tears for a lifetime already and doubted there were any left in him but he struggled to breathe and hush the soft wailing moans of grief that choked him.

Next Chapter

Story Home

Home

Snowflakes and Embers

Chapter Twenty Eight

There was no way he was going to make it out there to find Lach. His brother wouldn't be home, not tonight. Tonight he'd be with some small group, mourning, seeking absolution for signing orders that sent Watchers on missions they wouldn't return from. Lach wouldn't be easy to find and neither would Jas and he just wasn't up to searching for them.

It was all he could do to turn and sit where he'd fallen. Baxter came and sat next to him and Liam wrapped an arm around the dog. The stars over head were ones he'd seen his whole life, the buildings were ones he knew. Bits of music drifted to him and they were comforting and sounded nothing like Bastion. Even the cool air helped to reinforce where and when he was and Liam pressed the beaded belt to his forehead as he struggled to bring himself back under control.

Deseem waited for the blows to land. When his husband let go of his shoulder he dropped to the floor and waited, curled up the best way he'd learned because it was easier for a Healer to fix an arm than to fix a broken skull. Only Liam didn't beat him, he didn't even kick him a little. He just stood there with hate and hurt and anger in his eyes and a look so deeply betrayed that Deseem wished he would be beaten because it would have been a pain he could deal with.

Then Liam was gone and Deseem was alone. It took him a moment to understand he was really alone but when he knew he was alone he didn't get up, just stayed curled on the floor. He'd

considered giving his husband the beaded belt, or at the least telling him about it. It had been the woman's he was captured with and by rights wasn't his to keep but Deseem had become so phobic about that belt. He had to know where it was, that it was well tended, or panic crept in and stole his wits.

Now he wished he had shown his husband. If only to spare the man pain and to prevent him from being a further disappointment he should have told him. Deseem was a wife now and belonged to his husband, he had no place and no right keeping anything from the man. He was failing as a wife. No, he corrected himself, he had failed.

He was trying, he really was. Everyday was a small misery but he tried. The room was in perfect order but it never seemed to be enough to please his husband. Deseem saw to it everything was ordered and tidy as he'd been told, with everything in its place but that only seemed to anger his husband. He'd tried to fill his time with making things more beautiful but his husband appeared to notice all the flaws in Deseem's needlework compared to what a female bride's should be. He had even failed to please his husband in their bed, something Deseem thought he'd be forced to endure but had enjoyed. Only now when he offered it made Liam frown more and the displeasure became almost tangible.

He had failed utterly as a wife. Which, by itself, Deseem may have endured. He would get better at being a wife with practice and time. He'd learn what it was his husband wanted of him. Eventually he could find a way to get better, he had to, his husband's tolerance would wear thin and he would punish him for his failures. Deseem couldn't survive that, he knew he could physically but he couldn't survive being such a failure that a kind man like his husband would be driven to beat him.

Liam almost had tonight. He'd been close, right there on the edge and Deseem had pushed him to it with his secrets and deceptions and failures. He sat there, on the floor, alone. He could not return to his father's house or his brother's and it was clear he had failed here in his husband's house. Worse, so much worse, his husband had said he could never be a good wife, his husband knew he'd always fail. There wasn't even the hope for success left, he'd go on being a burden, being an annoyance and bother, driving his husband insane with anger and frustration.

Maybe his husband had noticed his damage. Deseem struggled to hide it and had, for the most part managed to hide it from his brother. Not that his brother seemed to care if he could read or not, think or not, learn or not but his husband seemed to value those traits. He'd shown him that amazing library, filled with more books than Deseem had known existed and he'd longed to be able to get lost inside the deep hallways. Only reading, since his cleansing, made him sick, made his head want to split open in pain and his stomach churn as the words wavered and floated, slipping about his mind trying to form logical reason. He seemed to have as much trouble learning too, the lessons in Trade which would be important to learn made his head throb and his heart race. He would have delighted over the complex lessons before, now he faced them with dread.

It wasn't just scholarly things he was struggling with that was also important. He wasn't able to adapt. People touched him in what he was told was a casual way and he wanted to scream at them to stop. Women were so different here, wives were so different and he could see his husband found Bastion ways unpleasing but Deseem was unable to adapt. When he tried it left him breathless in panic, desperate for the safety of their rooms and a return to the security of his place as wife. That was a failure too, the basic adaptation to his husband's people he was simply unable to do.

As he sat, trembling still like some nervous woman but unable to stop, he knew he had failed completely but knew he could redeem himself. They'd been married for a full cycle of the moon, he was now fully a wife and their houses fully bound together. He was no longer necessary and the marriage was full and complete. As the thought settled into his mind, Deseem stopped trembling. For the first time in years there was no edge of panic to his thoughts, no hint of fear

stalking him and he knew this at least he could give his husband.

He stood up and moved about the main room and straightened it as best he could. The uniform he'd been embroidering he retrieved from the ground and folded before placing on the table. There wasn't much out of place but he made sure everything was as ordered and tidy as he could make it.

There were little options for him. There were no bedposts, no rafters to loop a veil around and slip around his neck as his sister had done. The room seemed devoid of anything that would work. He'd read a legend once of a chaste wife that had been kidnapped by the enemy of her husband and rather than allow herself to be dishonored she'd bashed her head into a rock over and over. Deseem didn't think he had the courage to do that. There was a rack of daggers and swords Liam had moved in but Deseem was strictly forbidden to touch them and he didn't, not even to dust them.

There was only one option he knew of. On his husband's writing desk was a small dagger. It was tiny but sharp, he'd sat and watched as Liam would pause as he wrote letters, thinking of what or how to say what he wanted to say. His eyes would grow distant and he'd sharpen the already sharp little dagger while he thought. Since it was only ever used to break wax seals or trim paper, it was frightfully sharp. He hadn't been forbidden to touch that dagger and he moved over to the desk.

He paused there and slipped the wedding ring from his finger. Liam was smart, he'd understand what he'd done and why. The ring was beautiful, he'd sat for hours admiring the craftsmanship on it and spinning it on his finger had become a way to sooth himself when he felt broken. He'd miss it and wasn't sure he'd be allowed to keep it in the afterlife. It was a shiny circle on the desk's crisp stack of paper, unmistakable and not likely to be overlooked.

With the dagger in hand, Deseem moved to the bedroom. One of the curtains was ripped and hung limply. He moved and straightened it as best he could before moving around the room and making sure everything was in its place and ready for sleep. His husband would be tired when he returned and Deseem wouldn't have him fussing over things more than was necessary. Finally he unwrapped the veil from around his hair, folded it and put it away. His dress followed, leaving Deseem in the simple, plain off white linen under dress and with the dual braids, still lumpy and unskilled looking as he wasn't used to braiding his own hair yet, hanging loose down his back.

There was little doubt where he should do it. He'd make as little fuss and mess as he could. The soaking tub would require someone lifting him out of the high sides but the shower only had a small tiled wall, ankle high, to keep the water in place and allow it to go down the drain. They'd be able to easily remove him and turning a valve would wash his blood down the same drain. He lit only one of the lamps in the room, liking it darker, and moved to the shower.

It was dry, he saw that it was dried after each use and the cool tiles were pleasant to the touch. They were soothing as Deseem knelt down. He prayed for a moment but not for himself. He hoped God would see his actions and know they were not done from cowardice but from a desire to be as obedient a wife as he could be. It was something small he could do to make up for his failures, he couldn't please his husband but he could free him from their marriage as he wished. It was only secondary that Deseem desperately wanted it all to end, he would have endured forever if his husband didn't wish to escape as deeply.

The blade was sharp. Deseem drew it down his arm from his wrist and it bit him. It hurt, but not unbearably and blood welled from the cut line. He was surprised at how much and how fast but that was okay, it would be over sooner. There was no way he could properly clean the dagger he'd used so he wiped the flats of it on the side of his thigh and carefully placed the dagger on the low wall where it would easily be found.

He could feel his pulse beating in his bleeding wrist now and far less pain. The fingers on that

hand felt cold but when he moved them it made the wound hurt more so he held it still. Deseem settled back, letting his head rest on the wall of the shower and waited. Oddly, he found the pattern of his spilling blood filling the grout lines around the tile beautiful and the way his blood wicked up into the linen of his dress, it traced along fibers and made a spider web of red around the larger stain. He watched it as his body grew heavy and his skin started to feel cold and clammy but he was tired now and that was good. He was so tired all the time he wanted to rest and he let the exhaustion pull him down without fighting it.

Baxter nudged him and whined a little, the dog was impatient when he had to sit without a direct command. Liam sat up and scratched his ears to sooth the dog and the motion soothed him as well. It wasn't easy, but with each deep breath of the cold fall air he pushed panic and dark, horrible memories away. Dorena was dead, he was safe, years had passed and his new husband had been the one to free them so far in the past.

There were reasons the boy would have her belt. He might have found it after Liam had called lightening to cover their escape. He could have hidden it from his father or brother. It might not be a trophy of their defeat but instead maybe of the one act of free will the boy had been allowed. Dorena would have liked that, if the symbol of her place and rank had been cherished by an obviously beaten down child as a sign that he could be more. Deseem didn't seem to know who the woman was that he was captured with and Liam hadn't actually said that she was his lost wife. There were so many more logical reasons for why the boy had her belt hidden away than some mad plot from Bastion to push him over the edge and remove him.

Paranoia was something Liam had struggled with after the war. On the front every moment was one stolen from death, he above most others had to be always on guard. There had been plots to kill him, suspected of being a powerful Watcher with duel talents in magic not the even more terrifying Elemental he really was. Liam had routinely dyed his hair different colors in an effort to make Bastion think they were dealing with three different strong Watchers instead of one and still he'd nearly been killed several times. The one time he'd let his hair go white and crossed the boarder to meet a spy, the one time he hadn't been ultra vigilant and, yes, paranoid, they'd been captured.

Even when he returned home, the paranoia stayed with him. Even when Jas slowly helped him patch his mind back together and he knew it was baseless paranoia he still struggled with it. So he knew with those memories and emotions stirred up he was being baselessly paranoid and the more logical reasons were more likely. He should find Jas and ask her to be with him while he tried to explain to Deseem why he'd reacted so violently to finding Dorena's Shaman belt. Deseem was seventeen, could he even understand loving someone so much that their loss was maddening?

Liam sighed, seventeen, he'd been seventeen when he'd been married to Dorena. He'd known nothing of relationships, how to get along even casually with other people. If he was going to look at it objectively, he didn't know how Dorena and Norlan tolerated him. He'd had spates of insecurity and jealousy and fear, had reacted like a brat at times and like the boy he was most of the rest of the time. They'd smiled at him, loved him, helped him to grow and mature and it was only from their example and care that he had learned what it really meant to be in a loving relationship.

They had been patient with him. They'd dismissed what was just the silliness of youth and guided him to stability without over reaction. They'd never once simply gritted their teeth and endured him, even when he wasn't the easiest of men to live with. If they had treated him as he'd been treating Deseem, Liam doubted their marriage would have been such a source of love and joy. In fact he knew it would never have so quickly bloomed into something so meaningful.

Yet here he was, expecting Deseem to just figure it out. He kept growing frustrated with the boy for not trying when it was obvious he was trying too hard but just in the wrong areas. Liam hadn't taken the younger man into his life with love and the easy acceptance of even friendship, he'd viewed him from day one as a duty and burden and that had rippled out from there. It was his time now to be the guiding force, the steady influence and pass on the lessons Dorena had taught him.

Even if Deseem wasn't kree, they could build a nice, solid relationship as friends if Liam was strong enough, brave enough, to help the other man adjust. There had to be something good in the boy, Baxter adored him and no one fooled Baxter's sense of people. Liam just had to find a way to reach him and nurture that the way Dorena had with him. Once they had a friendship, they could have an understanding and with understanding they both could have happy fulfilling lives but that wouldn't ever happen unless Liam stopped acting like the spoiled, wounded, brat he so often was.

He raised Dorena's belt to his lips and kissed it. "You'd be laughing at me about now, wouldn't you?" He asked the night but the night stayed silent. So he asked himself what she would have done, with her skills with people and grace in dealing with them and he knew the answer. "Right, back home, apologize for falling off into the deep end, send for Jas and get her help, explain things and see where we can go from here and never, ever make him feel this can't be done." As she'd said to him on their wedding night, treaty marriages were what you made of them and Liam wasn't going to make this one any worse than it was. He stood up, his knees throbbing from where he'd fallen on them and patted Baxter. "Come along, boy, let's get this started."

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Story Home

Home

Snowflakes and Embers

Chapter Twenty Nine

Their rooms were the only ones that faced the smaller, more private gardens and their windows the only ones with light on. Even above them was simply storage, an older part of the palace that had fallen into disuse, Lach knew him well enough to know he'd be more comfortable there. He paused at their bedroom door and drew a steady breath before going inside.

"Deseem? Look, I'm sorry, I'm an..." but he didn't know how to say it in Bastion and figured the boy had to learn the word in Trade sooner or later. "an ass." He injected the word in Trade. "We need to sit down and really talk, I can't believe you're happy either." He talked as he moved from the neat as a pin bedroom to the main room. "I need to explain some things to you, about me...I..."

The main room was empty. Liam turned around in it and Baxter glanced up at him with a odd expression. Something glinted on his desk in the soft firelight and Liam moved over and found Deseem's wedding ring, placed with perfect care, in the center of the stack of his papers. The

boy was almost scared silly to go into the garden alone at noon, Liam couldn't picture him wandering across the palace so late at night.

"Deseem?" Liam took the boy's wedding ring and slipped it on his little finger, another testament to the fragility and poor health the other man had been struggling with. The ring fit comfortably on Liam's small finger, and even given that Liam's fingers weren't long and slender like Deseem's there really was nothing to the boy. "Baxter, find Deseem." He knew the dog already had the boy's scent and he expected to be led to the main doors of the room. Instead Baxter took off at a near run across the room and into their bedroom.

Liam followed but the dog stopped at the bathroom door. It made him feel silly, Deseem was most likely soaking in the tub, upset and frightened and hadn't wanted the engravings on the ring to become clogged with soap.

"May I come and we can talk?" He waited but received no answer, Baxter stayed by the door sniffing around its edges. "Okay, I can understand you not wanting to talk now but when you're done we have to." He almost turned away but Baxter scratched at the door and whined, something the door was too well trained to do as his nails could dig grooves in the door.

Liam had learned to trust the dog. Baxter was rarely wrong or prone to over reacting. He touched the ring on his little finger and frowned. It wasn't going to be helpful to explain to Deseem that he had a right to privacy and free will after barging in on his bath without invite but Liam knew Baxter and knew he was upset for a reason.

"I'm coming in." He announced and opened the door.

The room was dark but for a single lamp and it took his eyes a second to adjust. There was no water in the tub, no steam in the air. He scanned the room and spotted the boy sitting on the floor of the shower, slumped over still wearing his pale linen underdress. His eyes saw the dagger and pool of darkness at the same time.

"Oh Lady no..." He lit the rest of the lamps with a thought and room filled with light. Deseem's olive skin was ashen, paled down to a sickly gray shade. Baxter darted in ahead of him and moved to whine and nuzzle at the boy, licking his face a little trying to revive him. He grabbed a towel on his way past and shook it out, suddenly frightened to see if the boy was still breathing and sick when the skin he touched was chilled.

Blood still sluggishly pulsed from the cut wound on his wrist and dead men didn't bleed. He didn't wait to see if Deseem was breathing or had a pulse, he shook out the towel and burned out the center with a thought. That gave him a loop of fabric and he slipped that over the limp hand and up onto the slender arm. Quickly Liam twisted the fabric, tighter and tighter down, tight enough that the fragile skin would most likely bruise from the force he was applying but that would be okay, that would mean Deseem lived to get bruises. As the cloth twisted tighter the blood flow from the wound slowed and Liam put the mess of cloth on the tiles.

"Baxter, here." He called the dog over and physically lifted one large paw and placed it on the twisted fabric. "Stand, stay." He ordered firmly. The dog stared at him but stood in place, the fabric slowly untwisting under his foot. Liam had to get it tighter, he moved to a shelf near the shower, one with a round wood rod to hang a towel over. He gripped it, felt the way the fibers of the wood fit together and wove his magic around it. The rod snapped free, cleanly and easily and Liam knelt down and shooed the dog away.

The rod fit easily into the loop of fabric and he used it to twist it tighter. The boy's hand and arm were white now but the blood had all but stopped from the wound. "Good." He nodded and put the rod down. "Baxter, here." Now he put the dogs two front paws on either side of the rod. "Stand, stay." He ordered and now the dog's weight held the rod in place and kept the tension strong. "Good boy. Stand. Stay!" He hurried from the bathroom knowing Baxter would listen and

he pulled the cord for a servant. He couldn't afford to wait for them arrive and he darted out into the palace to meet them in the hallway.

"Sir?" The servant asked as he skidded around a corner and nearly ran her down.

"Quick, there's been an accident...Deseem, my husband.... Find a healer, send them here right away....find my brother, Lachlin, tell him to get Jas and Jan over here. Don't go hunting him, get someone with Speech to send for him, he'll hear but get a Healer he right away! Do you understand?"

The girl nodded. "Yes, sir."

"Than go!" He snapped and made her jump, frightened but Liam didn't wait, he was half way back to his room. His heart was pounding as he darted back into his room and ran for the bathing room. He'd left the boy's life in the paws of a dog, a smart dog but still a dog. If Baxter had moved from the literal spot Liam had placed him at the cloth would have unwound and Deseem could have bled to death while he was away.

The only change was that Baxter was whining and his tail took off wagging like mad when Liam darted into the room. "Good boy, such a good boy Baxter is!" He shushed the nervous dog and gave him the dismiss command when he was close enough to keep the cloth tightly twisted. His legs were starting to cramp up from crouching down and leaning over by the time he heard footsteps and a male voice he didn't know calling out.

"Back here! Hurry!" Liam called and tried to glance toward the door. The Healer was in Watcher black but Liam didn't know his name, he knew his face, lined and with salt and pepper hair. Liam vaguely remembered him as one of the Healers that had helped put him back together which meant he was on the rotation for the Palace.

"What's happened?" The man came in without pause but stopped when Baxter put his ears back and growled.

"Baxter, down." Liam barked. "He's protective when people he likes are hurt. It's okay."

"Good, I'd rather not be mauled." But there was only mild amusement in the man's voice and he moved without fear past where Baxter was laying down and looking unhappy about being settled. The Healer's quick eyes darted over Deseem with both his physical and internal. "Self inflicted?"

"Yes." There was no point to lying to a Healer and no shame either. "Watcher...?"

"Gaton, but I would be shocked if you remembered that." He flashed a quick smile and ran his fingertips down Deseem's left lower arm, pausing just above the cut. "We need to make a point of not meeting this way again for the third time."

"Only one left is Baxter there and he can't hold a blade so isn't likely."

"Hmm. Let's get him out of there...easy now..." Watcher Gaton stepped to Deseem's other side and did most of the actual lifting. Together they managed to get Deseem moved with ease out onto the open floor of the bathroom.

With Deseem's dusky skin ashen, wearing the pale linen, against the cool tile floor he looked like a corpse already. "Healer?" Liam questioned and found himself brushing a springy dark curl that had escaped the braids back.

"Shush and let a man focus..." The older man mumbled.

Liam felt as fussy and nervous as Baxter. The Healer's soft mutterings and their breathing were

the only sounds that broke the silence for what felt like too long. He found himself studying Deseem's face, the parted lips, the dark eyelashes and he was shocked by how young the boy looked like this. With the fear and worry, tension and submission removed from his face he looked far too young. Too young and fragile looking and if nothing more Liam felt responsible and protective of him.

"Liam?" Lach called out from behind him.

"Back here!"

"Lady bless.... Liam..."

"I'm fine." He saw the fear and darkness of memories sweep across Lach's face.

"Move you lump..." Jan pushed Lach physically out of the doorway and slipped around him. Jas followed and with their hair down and dressed similarly they were really almost impossible to tell apart. She moved quickly into the room and pried Liam's hand from the rod.

"Lach, get him out of here..." Jas added and moved to fall into the supportive role a Soulhealer took when the body was being worked on.

"I..." Liam glanced around but the Healers had taken over and there really wasn't anything for him to do.

"Liam, please..." Lach caught his brother's shoulder and pulled a little on him. "Come away and leave them room to work..."

He nodded and knew the logic of it but it wasn't easy to leave. "Baxter." He called and the bounded up to follow. It was only then that Liam noticed the blood on his hands and smeared on his uniform.

"It's okay, we'll get you cleaned up."

Liam could smell the alcohol on his brother but he was cold sober now. He let his brother pull him away to the main room and press him into a seat. Baxter settled against him and all Liam could do was sit and stare at the fire.

"Liam?" Lach spoke softly beside him and Liam glanced up to his brother.

"Thank you." He muttered when Lach handed him a damp towel and he could work on removing the drying blood from his hands.

"This is yours too, it was in the bath room." Lach held out his other hand and offered the beaded belt to Liam. "Is it..."

He nodded and took that from his brother as well. "How is he?"

"He's fine."

Liam snorted. "I saw how much blood there was, remember?"

"Gaton and Jan are good, he'll be fine." He swallowed hard but had to ask. "Liam, what happened?"

"I... it's my fault, Lach."

"No it's not, we both know he's been having trouble adjusting and..."

"No, I told him I wished there was a way out of his marriage. I yelled at him and left him, I may as well have taken the dagger to his wrist myself."

"Don't be stupid, this isn't your fault."

"He had her belt, Lach and I found it and I said some cruel things. I just... Lach, sit down, I need to tell you something."

"Okay..." Lach pulled one of the chairs closer. Liam was speaking so softly he was afraid he'd miss his words if he wasn't near by.

"You know that Irendorialah was the one that captured us. I didn't know it until I saw him here. He took us two days inland to a camp and his father. It was... it was their king that..."

It was a physical pain for Lach to watch the way his brother's eyes glazed over and hear how his voice could barely form the words. "It's okay." He whispered.

Liam swallowed hard before he could continue. "Maybe if I hadn't...hadn't cursed him so...when he whipped me I didn't... I tried not to react but when he hurt her... gods I think he enjoyed that it upset me. Maybe if I hadn't he wouldn't have hurt her so badly."

"You can't know that..." Lach spoke and waited not liking the silence. He watched the way Liam's fingers traced the ridges of the beads on the Shaman's belt. It was only when it seemed that Liam had forgotten where he was that he spoke again. "Liam?"

"Yes, anyway, you know one of their court helped us escape. I... I lied to you, to everyone, when I said I didn't remember anything about them, that I was too sick to recall..."

"You said it was a young man...I..." Lach glanced to the bedroom door and his magic flashed him images in hazy blurred colors. He never could see anything about his family clearly but he saw in the swirls of fuzz and chaos a pair of wide, shining amber eyes. "Deseem."

Liam nodded.

"That's why you gave in with such little fuss to this marriage, you recognized him. Has he...? That's how he had her belt..." Lach tumbled the idea over and over again in his thoughts. "Did his brother know?"

"I don't know, I don't think so. Deseem won't speak of it, only barely confirms it was him. I found her belt, Lach and I... I lost it...I was there again... I scared him, blamed him. He did this to please me, or try to, so I wouldn't have to endure our marriage. I did this Lach, it's my fault."

"No, it's not."

"It is, I haven't been trying... I..."

"Your brother is right, Liam, this isn't your fault anymore than it's mine or Lach's when you opened your own wrists." Jas said from the doorway of the bedroom.

Liam hopped to his feet. "How is he?"

"They're still working on him but he's in better shape than you were so don't you worry. Liam...I saw some things..."

"It's okay, I..." he paused and closed his eyes a moment. "I told Lach...told him who Deseem was, what he did before for us."

That made her smile gently. "Good, very good, I'm proud of you, that wasn't easy." And from her it didn't sound condescending because she knew how difficult it was for him to talk about any of that time. "Sit down than..." She grabbed the back of one of the chairs from the table and brought it closer to them but waited until Liam sat back down before taking it.

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Chapter Thirty

"Okay, we're seated, what did you find?"

She sighed and folded her hands in her lap. "I try to respect everyone's privacy, we all do..."

"We know that."

"I've only been around Deseem a little bit but what I got, just from a glance, was stubbornness and...well...fear. I don't think I've been around him once when he wasn't projecting some level of fear or panic, it's less so when he's here but that's pretty much it, fear, panic, stubbornness. I didn't want to pry deeper without being asked but with him being hurt..."

"You have to go deeper, it's okay." Liam nodded. "What did you see?"

"I'm not sure yet, and I don't want to say too much until I've done some research. But I will tell you this, someone has tried to radically alter his mind. Some of his behavior maybe tied into the damage I saw. Either way, I consider what I saw the scars of torture and that'll change behavior on its own. If anyone is going to have guilt for this placed at their feet, it isn't you Liam but whoever did this to him."

"Can you fix whatever it is?" He asked and felt even more like an ass for not seeing it sooner.

"I don't know yet, let me go over to the library and do some reading. Every medical text we have has been translated, it'll just take me a couple of hours. And stop that, none of us had any way of knowing this. Okay?"

Liam nodded but his eyes were studying the beads of Dorena's belt.

Jas stood but glanced to Lach and it was only at his nod that she was willing to leave. Lach could be trusted to stay and stand by his brother. When Lach and Bekka's relationship was still new and fragile he'd almost completely set her aside to help care for Liam and it should have ruined their growing relationship. Only Bekka was the sort to view that kind of love and devotion to family as a positive trait and knew, rightly so, that Lach would naturally enclose his wife and children inside that deep devotion. Jas knew it was one of the traits, one of the things that had

made her so drawn to Lach, even if Lach had worried it would cause him to lose her.

"He'll be okay." Lach said softly once Jas left.

Liam just nodded.

"You care about him?"

"He's my responsibility. I don't know him well enough to like or dislike him. It shouldn't have come to this..." Deseem's wedding ring was a stark rebuke on his hand.

"He'll be fine. You weren't even breathing when we found you and you were still so sick. You pulled through."

"Yeah." He agreed but he felt numb and sat, unthinking and waited.

It was a quiet wait that Lach didn't want to disturb for the sake of idle conversation. He sat and struggled with the need to get up and move, to do something but he knew he'd just be in the way. He wasn't going to fuss if Liam could sit so still, so could he. That didn't mean he didn't take his eyes off the door to the bedroom or be the anything but the first to notice when the Healers stepped into the main room.

"Thanks for your help, Gaton." Jan smiled.

He patted her shoulder. "Always a pleasure to work with you, call me if you need further help with the boy?"

"Of course and thank you for your discretion."

"Don't even need to ask." Gaton spared a kind look for where Liam and Lach stood before nodding his respects and leaving with much less rush than he'd arrived.

"Jan?" Lach asked when Liam simply stood there.

"He should live, sit down, both of you. Jas told you she's off to do some research?"

They nodded and sat but she took her time before taking up the chair her sister had abandoned.

"He lost a lot of blood, a lot, for someone his size and weight, too much. He's going to be weak for a while. We couldn't stress him too much and didn't fully close the wound, it's half healed though but he'll be sore for a while. I want him to stay resting for a week, at least and he's going to need to eat well. I'll tell the kitchens what he needs."

"He'll live?"

"He'll live, or should, he was in shock, that took what little strength he had left to Heal, so he's going to be anemic for a while. Liam he's put on some weight but not nearly what I'd like to have seen after a month..."

"He's eating, I see him eat anyway."

She nodded. "Gaton and I tried to check him over really well, made sure we didn't miss anything old or new but all his old wounds were seen to by a Healer, a skilled one at that. We've done all we can do as Healers, it'll be in his and Jas's hands now. Fixing the body doesn't fix the reason he'd do this in the first place and it's a possibility he'll try again. You'll have to watch him, closely, until we can resolve some of the whys behind this."

"I know but I don't think he'll try again."

"Liam..."

"I'm not being stubborn, for better or worse he's obedient. He does everything I tell him to do almost to the letter and more. I'll talk with him, forbid him from trying again, it might make him think twice before he does this again."

"It may but keep him in your sight too. If he tries again, I don't think we can save him." She'd kept Liam half sedated for almost a week and a guard on him day and night for longer. By the time he was strong enough to have a chance at surviving another attempt Norlen had arrived and he'd made enough progress that he wasn't so focused on death. "We have him out and he should sleep through the night."

"But he'll be okay?"

"He should yes."

She didn't need to say more, Liam understood. All the magic and Healing talent in the world sometimes just wasn't enough. Shock, trauma, blood loss all added up and someone could look stable and be gone in an hour. "Thank you, both of you. You should go get some rest I'll call if anything changes."

They exchanged a look. "Are you sure?"

"Come back in the morning but you both have to be tired. I'll sit with him tonight. It's fine, really, you said yourself there isn't anything you can do and he should sleep all night." He wanted them to go away, wanted them to stop looking at him sideways. He needed the time alone to pull his own thoughts back to stable ground. "Really."

"You'll call if you need anything?" Lach asked.

"I'm not a child, go home!" Liam grinned. "Really, go..."

"Okay, but Jas will be over whenever she finds whatever it was that set her tail on fire."

"Okay." He wondered if he'd have to push them out the door.

"Call if you need me, any time, I'm staying over here in the palace to be closer."

"Okay."

"Okay than." Jan hovered and glanced between her cousins before nodding and leaving.

"Are you going to act like a hen with only one chick too?" Liam raised and eyebrow.

Lach didn't answer, he just pulled Liam into a tight, close hug. "You know I love you, right?" He pulled from the hug and caught the back of Liam's neck. "You're my kid brother."

"I love you too, now go home to your wife and baby."

Lach let him go and nodded. "I'll be back over tomorrow. Check on him and you and then I'll have to make a report to mother and father. Would you like visitors?"

"As few as possible, he gets nervous with people in our rooms."

"I'll let it be known, we'll keep this as private as we can too."

"Thanks Lach."

"Send for me..."

"Yes now go home." It took a little more prodding but Lach soon was out of the room and Liam was alone. Except for a boy that had nearly bleed to death in an effort to please him and a dog that was stretched out on his blankets snoring lightly he was alone but it was close enough.

He left Baxter to sleep and very carefully took Dorena's belt with him into the bedroom. The Healers had stripped Deseem and the linen underdress as placed over the edge of the tub in the bathroom but they had washed the blood away. It gave him nothing to do but pull a chair over and sit, facing the ashen faced boy who looked too young and too frail under the covers. He settled in, his fingers running over the beads of the belt and watched the shallow, slow breaths drift in and out of Deseem's chest.

Part of Liam's mind knew he was dreaming, it was a dream he had often. He was running, being chased, his heart pounding in fear but he was too frightened to look over his shoulder and see what was there. His feet stumbled and he fell only it wasn't springy ground he fell into but warm water, thick and slick and red. He fell into a world of blood and Liam struggled to escape it, floundering. When he opened his mouth to scream he tasted blood, smelled blood and he knew it was the blood of all the people he'd killed and it was too deep, too thick to swim in, he was going to drown in blood.

Except a strong hand caught his wrist and pulled. Liam felt the blood trying to suck him down and for a moment he wasn't sure which would be stronger, the hand pulling him up or the pool of blood drawing him down. The hand tightened and pulled harder and Liam felt himself rising, naked, the blood sliding over his skin and hair to run in tiny rivers from his body. He hit the solid shore and his free hand scrambled for purchase as he struggled the rest of the way to safety.

He lay there, on the dry ground, naked and dripping the blood of others. He coughed and spat out blood and wheezed to catch his breath. A towel appeared in front of his face and it startled him enough that he pulled back.

"Don't be absurd, it won't bite." A woman's voice, rich and full, laughed at him.

Slowly, Liam took the towel and as he wiped the blood from his face he was surprised to see it was only water the towel collected. "Thank you." He whispered and pulled his legs under him.

When he glanced up something cold shivered over his spine. The woman was stately tall but he'd guess she'd be shorter than he was by quite a bit. She was dressed in black and while it looked like a Watcher uniform there was enough differences that he knew it wasn't. Formal, yes, with a hint of a military feel, yes but not a real Watcher uniform at all. She was in boots and black pants that came down over the boots, full hipped and round of breast there was no doubt she was female, fit but beautiful. Her hands were covered in black gloves and her face was covered in a black mask, beaded and beautiful but a real mask. It left her mouth and chin, her eyes and neck the only part of her exposed and it was starkly pale in comparison to all the black. Dark brown wavy curls, thick and loose tumbled around her shoulders and she smiled down at him.

"Oh...this is a dream." Liam whispered.

"Perhaps." She answered and sat down on the ground next to a fire that appeared. Next to the fire someone was wrapped in blankets, sleeping and she carefully tucked them tighter around the still form.

He scrambled back and stood up, not worried about being bare and naked in front of her. "I know you."

"Aye, you should, of all humans you should." She smiled gently.

"Lady Death."

"Indeed but this is just a dream, remember?" She reached down and petted the sleeping head, dark, black curls twisted around her fingers. "He is beautiful."

Repulsed by fear and uncertainty but drawn by a need to know he stepped forward enough to make out the slumbering face resting by the fire. "Deseem, you're here for him....no...it's not..."

"Hmm?" She stroked the side of the boy's face.

"It's not fair!"

"Death rarely is, you of all people know that."

"No....he's...it's not his fault. I did this, it's my fault, take me instead."

She glanced up and there was sadness in her eyes. "You can't barter for him, least of all with something that will be mine one day or another. Besides, I'd have thought you'd be happy to be free of him, he certainly thinks so."

"I'm an ass."

That made her laugh rich and deeply. "Oh, my, you are that. I've missed our conversations."

The laughter made him frown but he didn't protest it. "Please..." Liam said softly. "Please...not him....not now..."

"You think of yourself and the guilt you'll feel if I take him, not this boy."

He wanted to lie and deny it but he couldn't quite do it. "Yes, partly...yes but he's never..." He had to glance down to the still face. "He didn't mean to do this, he's lost..."

"If he returns to you, will you be the one to help find him?"

Liam nodded, hard. "Yes. I'm trying it's...it's just...I can be an ass."

"Oh, silly, near sighted humans, you aren't an ass, you're just as lost as he is." She stroked the still face and ordered some of the loose dark hair before she stood up. She stepped over to Liam stood and ignored how he tensed as she reached to brush a damp lock of hair from his face. "Find each other, I can wait."

Liam startled away in his chair, nearly tipped it over he jerked so violently. A hand had touched him, shaken him and broken the odd, far too vivid dream.

"Shhh, it's just me." Jas said. "Are you okay? You felt...odd."

Liam was breathing hard and glanced up at his cousin. "I was dreaming....I... the Death Queen

and blood and being lost and oh... Lady is he okay?"

"Deseem? He's fine, resting, are you okay?" She didn't like how his eyes darted about as if looking for something that wasn't there.

Liam stopped and drew a long deep breath. "I'm..." lost his mind added but he pushed it down. "I'm fine. It's morning?"

"Yes, I sent for Jan and Lach, I have some news and figured you wouldn't mind if they hear too."

He nodded. "Need to take Baxter out." But while he did, it was a convenient excuse to go outside under the rising sun alone and try to gather the fragments of the dream around him before the faded. Baxter happily darted outside but Liam followed more slowly, it had felt real and not real and important but with a hint that he wasn't really supposed to remember. He shook his head and rubbed his eyes and pulled his thoughts to the more pressing concern of taking care of his husband.

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Chapter Thirty One

When Liam got Baxter to stop hopping about the garden and back inside Jan and Lach had both arrived as well as tea. The fragrant brew wasn't in small china cups, they'd moved on to large stoneware mugs and Liam didn't protest when they pressed one, thick with honey, into his hands. It was steaming hot and he cooled it a little with a thought so he wouldn't have to wait to drink it.

"How is he?" He asked since Jan was hovering near Deseem and obviously checking on him.

"Still out but no worse, not much better but no worse." She sat on the edge of the bed and eased Deseem's limp arm out from under the covers. She'd brought a Healer's kit with her and had it open to clean his wound and change the bandages. "Please, you can talk while I work, you won't wake him. What did you find Jas?"

"Well... it took a while and I had to get the librarians to help some, just because it's all been translated doesn't mean I knew which book to start with. I had to work outward too, it wasn't in their medical texts and I had to go to some religious volumes and than narrow it down from there to rites and rituals surrounding marriage. Brace yourselves, it isn't pretty."

"Out with it, Jas, you're killing me here." Lach prodded.

"Well, in Bastion, for a poor family, this would never be applied, wives, daughters are sheltered but enjoy far more freedoms than wealthier women. Most wives and sisters of a poor family work along side their husbands and brothers happily, the rules and laws really do offer protection for

them and children but the higher up in money and power you go the more it makes a woman property and the more likely the husband is to be cruel."

"Jas, please..."

"Sorry, just read so much last night! Anyway because the husband is often harsh, abusive, there is a cultural belief women shouldn't hold power of any kind, including magic. Wouldn't want to be beating your wife and have her set your hair on fire or throw you across a room, even someone untrained can lash out when frightened or trapped. So a ritual was created to cleanse a woman about to become a wife, they take a couple of Soulhealers in and do horrible things to her mind. I mean if there's any therapeutic end to doing this? I'd have the person out cold with both a Healer and Soulhealer and it'd take like six seven hours to do it delicate and nice and still would leave them in pain when they woke up. The way Bastion does it? The woman is aware and awake and it's interwoven with religious rituals and takes the better part of three days. It's torture, flat out, simple torture and even if it doesn't fully take once her mind heals? Most women live in fear of facing another cleansing and will do anything to avoid it."

"Are you..." Liam tried to get his mind around several things that seemed impossible all at once. "You're saying Deseem has some magic talent and that they what? Cleansed him of it?"

"Well, partially cleansed, it feels to me like it's half finished and not healed right. This is really insidious stuff, you can adapt it to alter almost any behavior. If your bride to be talks to much? You can make it so she can literally only speak if spoken to. It's almost always worked in that the bride will have to struggle to read, assuming she even was taught before and will become ill if she forces it. Learning is also made more difficult so she's unlikely to develop unnecessary new skills easily. Generally the process leaves the bride quiet, submissive, quick to obey and living in absolute terror of being cleansed a second time."

"Of being tortured again..." Liam whispered softly, his eyes locked onto the sleeping boy.

"Deseem has magic? What talent?" Lach asked. His mind was whirling about risk and damage, threat and training.

"He had a talent, yes, but Lach his mind is...well, it's all ripped up and scarred over and a mess right now. He couldn't reach beyond his own skull if his life depended on it. I've no way of knowing which talent he had, not in the state he's in."

"His brother is a pretty strong Firestarter."

Liam shook his head. "Stonecypher, he was a Stonecypher, the blocking bracelets are made of metal. It dissolved under his touch." He knew he was blinking too hard. It was one part of that memory he hadn't actually remembered. "I'd forgotten, I couldn't remember how I got it off...I...I should have known. I should have made him see you or someone."

"Stop that." Jan scolded as she tied off the bandage.

"She's right, stop it, it's not helping."

"I..." Liam cut himself off and nodded. "Can you help him? Fix what they did?"

"I can help, I think, it won't be easy or quick or right away but I can help. I can't say I can undo it all, I don't know if he'll ever have his magic back but I can certainly make him more comfortable, stable and less likely to try this again."

"You think he opened his own wrist because of this cleansing? That would make his brother responsible for this, it goes from cruelty to attempted murder." That was an issue to be brought up with their parents, Lach knew it would have to be mentioned. Deseem was now a member of

their family.

"This would take two, three maybe, Soulhealers, the party from Bastion didn't have a single Soulhealer with them and this feels recent, less than a year maybe? It's unlikely his brother had anything to do with this other than concealing it from us. And no, I don't think this made him do it, but I do believe the constant fear of further punishment, the pressure of trying to conceal what was done mixed with being unable in his present state to assimilate easily into a new culture did, without a doubt in my mind, contribute to his making the choice."

"And he's been in pain from this?"

"Right now? I don't know, I'd doubt it, more a sense of being constricted, of being confined but when this happened I'd imagine he was in quite a bit of pain for a long while and without anyone around able to soothe it since they weren't traveling with a Soulhealer."

Liam rubbed his eyes. "That's what he meant about being not too damaged, I've been thinking he meant the beatings...I... fix him, as much as you can."

"Of course but know this, Liam, I'm betting he reacts badly to learning you know. His brother was smart and he knew enough of our ways to know how repulsive this would be to us. There would be the fear that Deseem would be rejected as damaged if you knew and it's a fear the boy may still harbor. I still recommend he not be left alone, at least in the short term."

"Telling him it's okay isn't going to make much of a dent." Liam nodded.

"I doubt it, not after what he's been through. The beatings would be bad enough on their own but with this added in, it's going to take some time but least now we know how to help him." She smiled gently, trying to offer some measure of hope. "What do you want us to do, Liam?"

"Our parents need to be told." Lach added gently.

"I know." There was no avoiding that and most likely no avoiding everyone learning Deseem was damaged. "He'll wake up soon, I'll talk with him. I'll need someone to stay with him while I'm teaching."

"I'll move in here if you'd like." Jas nodded. "This is too important not to be taken seriously."

"Thanks but he's really timid with anyone being in our rooms for too long, how about just while I'm away. Healings to be done while I'm here? How long will he be bed ridden?"

"A couple of days." Jan shrugged. "It's going to depend on how well he bounces back. He's going to be exhausted for a couple of weeks but should feel up to moving around some in a day or two."

"How long are we looking at for treatment on your end, Jas?"

"I honestly haven't a clue, I've never seen anything like this. Weeks, months, maybe longer? It's going to have to be done slowly."

Liam was nodding now, they had a plan, a course of action and that was something. If there was a direction, a goal, they could have movement and Liam could deal with most anything, it was being helpless and idle that drove him crazy. "Okay, this can be done."

"You need to get some more sleep." Jan warned.

"I'm fine I slept some."

"Well, you're going to sleep some more. Even if it's just an hour or so... Don't worry, Jas or I will be here, we'll wake you well before he comes out of it. Promise."

"I..." Liam glanced from his cousin to his brother and all of them looked as stubborn as they could be. "Alright but you have to wake me before him."

It wasn't Jas or Jan that woke him. While he'd slept he'd drifted around and ended up with his forehead pressed to the side of Deseem's shoulder. A slight shrug of the flesh he was resting against was enough to stir him from his sleep. He woke as he normally did, quickly and fully and half sat up.

The room was empty, the twins weren't to be found. Someone had made a quick repair of the torn curtain and had blocked out most of the late morning early afternoon sunlight. Baxter was missing too and not snoring on his bed in their bedroom. He was alone in the room, in the bed, with Deseem and the boy was awake.

Golden eyes flashed under a flutter of black lashes.

"Deseem..." He remembered how awkward and how disappointed he'd felt when he'd finally woken up.

"I..." He stopped and swallowed hard. "I'm sorry. I..." his voice cracked from the dryness of his mouth and throat.

"Here..." Liam moved to the bedside table and picked up his cooled mug of honey sweet tea. He scooted over and helped steady Deseem as he raised the mug to the boy's lips. One slender, ashen hand rose to cover Liam's own while he took in a few swallows. "Better?"

"I'm sorry I failed you. Please do not look at me, my husband."

"Deseem no... last night, I was rude...I... the belt you had? The woman I was captured with? She was my wife, I loved her very much and it just was a shock to see you with her belt. I took it badly. I snapped at you and it wasn't fair. I want to know how you came to have it but I won't ask, I'll wait until you tell me, okay? I'm going to believe you didn't mean it viciously or in a hurtful way and have faith in you."

"I'm sorry..."

"Stop that." It broke his heart now, instead of annoying him, to hear those whispered words. "I know what they did to you. Jas saw it and did some research, I know they cleansed you."

"I'm sorry, I'm not too damaged I swear, my husband, I swear it is so, they only managed one part of the ritual, I will be a good wife."

"No, you aren't damaged...you're just hurt." He sighed and took a sip of the cooled tea. "Deseem, I know what it must feel like, I can imagine anyway but killing yourself isn't an answer, not for you, not for me. I'm not thrilled to be married again, any more than I can imagine you're happy to be stuck with me but I don't want you to go away. I certainly never meant for you to...to..." He sighed and couldn't tell if he was getting through to the boy. "I'm the one who's sorry. Can you forgive me?"

Deseem sat silent, too exhausted to be frightened but worried it was a trap, worried as he always was about the wrong words being said. "There is nothing to forgive, my husband."

"No, there is, I was harsh with you. I didn't care enough to make sure you were okay. I just assumed you were being stubborn." Or, he'd assumed Deseem was a little slow and unable to adapt. "I should have tried harder. I'm sorry. Do you believe I am an honorable man, Deseem?"

"My husband is a good man and I am blessed to have been given to him."

"I'm going to make you some promises, Deseem, and I'm going to ask you to make some promises to me too. I promise you that we're going to do everything we can to fix what they did to you. Jas isn't sure how long it'll take or if you'll be able to get your magic back but she's pretty confident that the littler things like learning and reading can be undone." He glanced up and saw stark fear in Deseem's eyes but the boy hadn't moved. "It won't hurt, I promise you, it won't hurt. Do you believe me?"

Slowly Deseem nodded but the fear lingered in his eyes.

"I promise I'm not going to beat you or hurt you, I might yell occasionally but I don't mean anything by it and I'll try not to. I just, I'm not used to living with anyone any more, I'll try but I still may be snappy, just know I don't mean it, I'm moody and annoying and... well... I won't abandon you, or cast you out or wish you gone or beat you or hurt you and I swear, I swear by all I hold sacred, I will do everything in my power to see no one ever hurts you again." He leaned forward and brushed a stray, dark curl back from Deseem's face, the back of his hand slid across the boy's skin with deliberate tenderness. "You don't need to be afraid here, not any more. Not of me, not of other people, not of punishment. I promise you, I'm going to try to help you be happy."

Happy, Deseem wasn't even sure what that word meant any more. Happiness used to be time alone to sit in the shade and read, no servants fussing around him, no tutors demanding perfection, no fear of becoming a bride. Happy seemed a word from another life or one that belonged to someone else and he didn't even believe he was capable of that emotion any longer. He didn't need to be happy, he'd settle for being unafraid and for not being a burden.

"Sound fair?"

Deseem forced himself to nod.

"Now, I need you to promise me some things."

"Whatever my husband wishes." He whispered but hated that he'd woken up, hated having this conversation, hated that they saw he was neither pure and cleansed nor whole and undamaged. It would have been better if they'd just let him slip away.

"Promise me you won't try to harm yourself again, for any reason."

That was a painful promise to make, it took away his one means of escape. "I..." If he agreed he couldn't even arrange for someone else to end his life because it would force his husband to break his own promise of protection. He didn't want to agree. "I promise."

Liam saw the struggle and knew the source. When Lach had asked him to make a similar promise, Liam had refused. The idea of ending his life, of finding some solace and comfort in having that option left in his control, had been one he'd needed too desperately. It surprised him that Deseem agreed and he hoped it wasn't simply out of duty to agree and then he'd reason a way to break that promise.

"Thank you, I'm going to believe you mean that promise. Also, I want you to promise to speak to me more. I want you to tell me when you're frightened or hurt or worried or don't like something."

"You would wish to know that?"

"Of course I do, you're my husband."

"I... I should be trying to please you, yet I've failed and you still wish to..."

"You haven't failed, you've been trying too hard, assuming I'm a Bastion husband. I'm not. If you want to please me? Speak to me. Tell me how you're feeling and what you're thinking. I don't give a damn about the curtains or the rooms being perfect, those things aren't important."

"But...knowing what I'm thinking is?"

Liam studied the ashen face, the dark circles under the bright eyes. Deseem was beautiful even like this and he wanted to gather the younger man into his arms. He wanted to kiss him, pull him close, stroke his hair and tell him it would all be okay. It was an unfair desire, Deseem didn't need to be pitied anymore than Liam had needed pity and he didn't need to be sheltered and locked away. He needed to be encouraged and supported and cared about. He needed to learn he could stand on his own and make his own shelter. For a young man that had spent his entire life cloistered, that might be an impossible goal but Liam was going to try.

"Yes, it is, it would make me happy if you'd trust me with those things."

It was another scary promise. Deseem's thoughts, his feelings, what went on inside his head was all he'd had to himself. If he shared that it could be used against him, used to hurt him and worse, would no longer be his and his alone. "I promise."

"Good." Liam smiled. "I'm sorry I was so harsh with you but I did mean it when I said I didn't wish a wife. You are not my wife, you aren't a woman. I know the Bentan tradition but it's not necessary here. You are my husband, a very beautiful young man. I won't tell you to stop wearing Bastion dresses or trying to run my household as you've put it but I will say you must stop trying to fulfill some false idea of perfection. I don't need it, don't wish it, don't seek it and it's driving us both a little crazy."

"My husband..."

"Don't be my wife, be my husband and maybe we can become friends. I would really like for us to become friends."

"I... I can't...my husband...I'm to be your wife...I know how to do that, I don't know how to be a husband or friend." It made his head hurt when he tried to think about it, in the same twisted sick way that reading did.

"Let's not worry about that for now. Let's focus on getting you well, physically and getting Jas to Heal what was done to you and we'll worry about the rest of this later. We've plenty of time, all the time we need." He took up the boy's left hand and ignored the bandages on his arm. "Will you please take this back?" He slipped the ring from his own little finger and waited. Deseem studied it and Liam for a long silent moment in that serious, far to solemn way he had before he nodded. "Good." Liam slipped the wedding ring back on the boy's finger. "My husband's ring belongs on his hand." He raised it and kissed the gold band before lowering the hand back to the blankets. "Now, let me see where the twins got off too and Baxter's been worried about you, are you hungry?"

He wasn't though he had been eating far better since he was married. "I...no, not really, more thirsty."

"Good, stay in bed, you're very weak." He smiled a tiny bit because that answer was one of the first really honest things he'd gotten the other man to say.

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Chapter Thirty Two

Hungry or not, Liam was going to see to it Deseem ate something, even if it was small and light and he slipped from the bedroom to send for food and drink for them both. As soon as he opened the bedroom door he heard lowered voices and he was surprised to find his main room filled with people. It wasn't just healers, though a good number of them were and the majority appeared to be Soulhealers but there were Senators and such as well as Malcome and Lach and everyone seemed annoyed. Jas and Jan stood with their backs to the bedroom door and almost acting as a physical barrier between the small crowd and where they'd been resting.

Liam carefully shut the door behind him. "What's going on here?" He let his voice drop down to about a degree above freezing and the room went silent.

"Liam..." Jas sighed and turned.

"I asked, what is going on here?" He kept his eyes on the crowd behind her.

"I'm going to need some help getting the Healings started on Deseem so I called in some of the Soulhealers. I'm sorry."

"No, don't be, you call in whomever you need to help you." He could guess that the Watcher-Healers were the ones she'd called and the Priests had simply followed. "The rest just invited themselves I assume, and the rest of you? I don't recall inviting a single one of you into my home."

"There's some concern over Prince Deseem's health." Malcome explained.

"My husband prefers the privacy of our rooms. He doesn't like strangers pestering us. So unless you've been invited." He locked eyes with his eldest brother. "Get the hell out."

"Liam..." Malcome tried again. "We just want to see...."

"Do I need to repeat myself?" Liam didn't even raise his voice but some of the more timid stepped back. The ground below them shivered a little and thunder rolled outside in spite of the blue clear skies. "Leave and do not return without invitation."

People hurried to leave, nodding apologizing and whispering among each other as they left but Liam didn't care so long as they left. The Soulhealers in Watcher black that Jas had actually invited lingered as well as Malcome and that made Liam frown. He waited until the room had mostly cleared.

"I don't recall inviting you, Malcome."

Liam's older brothers shared a look. "I'm concerned..."

"Odd, I don't remember your concern when I was ill. Have you suddenly developed a Soulhealer's Empathy?"

"Liam..."

He wished Malcome still couldn't hurt him but the raw truth of their relationship was cutting. "Please, leave, Deseem has...we all have enough to deal with at the moment."

Malcome hovered for a moment, looking to Jas or Lach for support and wasn't surprised when they backed Liam. Finally he nodded. "Send for me if you need me." He didn't linger in the room and closed the door, missing Liam's small snort of restrained angry protest.

"Liam, you could have..."

"What? Welcomed him with open arms?"

"You're going to have to forgive him one day." Jas reminded him.

"But not today I don't have to. So, what's all this now?"

"While Deseem is weakened some of his natural wariness will be eased too, if we may, we'd like to lay some foundations as soon as he's awake."

"Well, you're in luck, he's awake."

"You left him alone?"

"He's not going to do anything, I have his word. Order some breakfast..." Liam poured water into a glass. "Give us a few moments, you won't get far with him being tucked naked into bed."

"Like some help?" Jan offered.

Liam shook his head. "It's okay. Just all of you..." he glared at the Soulhealers. "If you frighten him or hurt him it'll be me you're answerable to. Clear?" He didn't wait for an answer and knew the threat was unnecessary but he couldn't not say it. It felt less absurd when he saw Deseem sitting in bed, naked, still too thin, looking exhausted just from sitting up, in fact it didn't feel like enough of a threat.

Lach shut the bedroom door softly and moved to join his brother at the table. "I thought you didn't let Baxter sleep in the bed?" Deseem was laying under blankets and covers, looking fragile and still pale after almost a week but Baxter was stretched out beside the boy. Slender arms were wrapped around the thick chest of the dog as if he were some massive stuffed animal. It made for a cute sight, dark wavy hair spilled everywhere and the dog snoring.

"I don't normally but Deseem sleeps more soundly and Baxter's been fussing so over him. I still can't get over how well those two get along and now that Deseem's not worried I'll beat him for petting Baxter, he's more comfortable too."

"Baxter is good therapy for broken hearts it seems. Malcome been by? He's asked after Deseem

and you both but I wasn't sure how much you wished said."

"He has the official reports, that should be plenty for him." He heated the tea back up and swirled the dark brew around. "It was enough for him when I was ill."

"How long are you going to hold that grudge?"

"As long as I feel like."

"Oh that's real smart, I'm sandwiched between idiot brothers."

"He's the one that won't let it go. He still won't allow me to see his children, I'm their uncle, Lach, same as you but I've maybe said three words to them outside of court functions. He still tries to shield me even when he knows he can't. He's the one that is irrationally afraid not me. I've never done a thing to earn that fear."

Lach had to toy with his own tea. "You weren't conscious when your magic opened, Liam."

"Exactly. I was unconscious, untrained, unaware and fourteen and he still holds that against me."

"What you did without even straining...it was terrifying. Captain Dartin wet himself during one of your fits and he was the toughest man I've ever met."

"He was also elderly and had a weak bladder."

"True but still, you don't remember it. Malcome doesn't like being frightened of you but he is and he's no idea how to deal with that. Do you think he's comfortable knowing he'll be King one day and may have to give the order to put you down like some rabid dog should you lose control? He has nightmares about that, so does Mother for that matter."

"But not you."

Lach glanced up and found Liam's blue eyes difficult to meet. There was some quality to them, some raw honesty, some harsh strength that was chilling. "Sometimes, yes I do. Do I believe your control will ever snap? Not anymore than anyone else's could. There doesn't seem to be a connection between magical talent or the strength of that talent and breakdowns, that it boils down more to personality. I believe if ever there was someone born capable of being stubborn enough and strong enough to control what you do without falter it is you. That doesn't mean I still don't worry. I couldn't stand to sign such an order. I'll resign first."

"Don't be stupid."

"I'm not being stupid. I can't live with that again. It about killed me to send you to the front, I won't do that again."

"It shouldn't have been your call, Dartin getting knifed like that. Should have been years before you came up to being Captain. It wasn't fair."

"My first order as Captain... Dartin had been stalling on signing it too, it was the top of his stack." He sighed. "Point is, when you unleash mayhem? You're at the center of it, you know what's going on. It freaks everyone else out, especially if they've one of the Elemental talents and can feel what you're doing. You provoking Malcome isn't going to resolve the bad blood between you two."

"Maybe I don't want to resolve it? Maybe it's better we aren't close, for both of us. And what's this I provoke? He's the one that provokes me."

"Maybe." Lach agreed. "I'll leave it to the reports for Malcome."

"Thank you."

"You should consider inviting him by and mother and father too before they have to come by against your will."

"It's not my will, not fully." He sighed and slouched in his chair. "Deseem is so...timid. He's slowly getting used to Jas and Jan coming and going and you to some small extent but he's twice as jittery than when we're alone together. I've been thinking about Bishick and how to Deseem to be more at ease around him because until he's willing to actually speak to him, he's not going to learn Trade."

"Any thoughts?"

"Well, one, I was thinking of taking Deseem to the woods."

"To meet the Guardians?"

Liam nodded. "Maybe if he sees, maybe if he understands that Watcher isn't like some court granted title, he'll trust us more. If I can only get him to trust Watchers that's a start."

"Well... actually that's not a bad idea. The Guardians pack a solid impact and Deseem is part of the family. It is tradition that every member of the family is introduced to them. Even having been around them before I know I was scared silly making that walk. Bekka barely said a word for almost a week after she met them. Which, knowing Bekka is a huge deal. Would certainly impress the nature of the rank upon him." He nodded. "I think it's a great idea."

"Assuming they'll allow us entry and make themselves known."

"That'll be the easy part, they have always had a soft spot for you."

Liam found himself frowning into his tea. While it was an honor to be so welcomed by the mysterious creatures, he'd sought them out from loneliness and a sense of not quite belonging with his own people. It was a tender memory and not something he was willing to be boastful of.

Liam had noticed that Deseem would sit at a vanity while dressing for the day but would rarely glance up and look in the mirror. Lach had given him the week off to stay in or around their rooms and be on hand while Deseem recovered but his time was running out. There were duties he had to attend to, obligations he had to fulfill and as much as he disliked leaving Deseem alone he would soon have to spend at least part of the day away.

He sat on the edge of the bed and watched as his husband struggled to divide his hair into two sections and then to plait those sections into two braids. He was doing a poor job of it, a fact that the veil he still continued to wear often covered but one Liam had noted.

"For a man that can sew with such tight, neat stitches, you're awful at braiding." He smiled as he lightly teased, hoping the amusement and warmth would be in his voice.

"I'm sorry, my husband."

"Don't be sorry, I don't mind. You should have accepted your brother's offer, to leave some of your servants behind. They could have done that for you and it would have been good for you to have someone of your people here with you."

"No." Deseem almost snapped. He quickly glanced up and met Liam's eye in the reflecting glass. "No, I'll manage. I am learning, my husband, trying to learn to care for myself without servants."

Whole sentences from the boy still surprised Liam but he found it pleasing. "You could have one of our servants help you, Celeste has three lady's maids help her dress and do her cosmetics and hair for court."

"Thank you, my husband, but I am managing."

"Still, would have been nice to have someone of your people here with you. It must be difficult to be so far from home, from everyone you know and everything you know..." Liam had run away to the Fisher coast to find such a place and had found it comforting but he knew he was odd in that thinking and most people would have been homesick.

"Our..." Deseem paused and reminded himself it was okay. "Our servants are not like yours."

"Oh?" Liam knew, he knew enough about Bastion culture to know about the formality that would have surrounded someone of Deseem's rank but he wanted the boy to tell him and talk to him.

"Your servants are...informal. They act more like they are family than servants, they seem to know their place but they are so... so...familiar."

That made him chuckle a little. "Yes, they are at that. One of the cooks caught me stealing a muffin when I was seven, he scolded me and set me to scrubbing pots for the rest of the afternoon. My father had to come collect me from the scullery. It's just how we are. It's not that way for your people?"

"No, they would barely speak to me. There is no one in Bastion I miss and my life is with you, my husband." He struggled with the braid he was working on but winced from his injury and one whole section escaped to unravel.

There was a tone of actual affection to Deseem's voice and it made Liam's smile falter a little bit. Liam stood and crossed the room to stand behind Deseem. "Here, you have to be careful the wound is barely Healed and it'll be sore for a while. Let me help. I know a thing or two about braiding hair. On the Fisher Coast, everyone has hair below their waist but to work they braid it back and they can make braids so tight even a hard inland wind can't whip it free." Only on the Fisher Coast to braid someone else's hair was a means of showing affection and bonding and often implied far more. It wasn't something done casually. Lover's braided each other's hair, close siblings, closest of friends.

His hands disappeared into the thick weight of Deseem's hair. It was such a contrast to his own not just in color but in texture and thickness. "My hair, even if I have it braided back for days, never holds any wave. As soon as I unbraid it, it falls straight again." It really did feel like heavy silk threads across his fingers and Liam finger combed it into sections and then quickly made matching neat braids. "There, how's that?"

"Thank you, my husband."

"You know, you don't have to wear it like this, if you don't wish to. I noticed you stopped wearing the black lines around your eyes."

"I...I don't know how to apply them myself."

"Oh, hmm, I bet Bekka could show you. Celeste's never had to do her own cosmetics but Bekka, her family is nobility but working nobility. They have a title but no land, are fairly middle class really. She was raised fairly simply and still gets by with little fuss. If you'd like, when you're feeling better? I know she wouldn't mind. She keeps asking if you'd like her to come over for tea." He really wanted Lach and Bekka to come by as often as they could because it would do Deseem good to see their relationship and to see a wife here didn't get beaten for speaking her mind.

"If it would please you..."

"Deseem..." He knelt down to glance up into the turned down face.

"I'm sorry." Deseem whispered. "I'm trying...this just...I..."

He saw the edge of fear and panic and took up one of the slender hands between his own. "I know but it'll keep feeling wrong until you get used to it more. Would you wish Bekka's help, when you're ready for it?"

"I... don't know...people..." He hated this, hated having to struggle with speaking and saying the truth of how he felt. "People frighten me so."

"Jas thinks a lot of that will fade as she undoes what they did to you. You don't need to make that choice now." The hand in his trembled a little and Liam felt what he imagined Lach must have when he'd been so broken or the times as a boy he'd been overwhelmed with his isolation and had turned to his big brother with sadness in his eyes. "Look, Deseem, I'm going to have to go back to working. You're stronger now and they're really in need of qualified teachers for the classes I'm covering."

Deseem kept his eyes down but he nodded.

"But before I do, I want to explain something about our people to you but I don't think explaining it will do much good so, if you're feeling up to it, I'd like to show you. Okay?" He waited until Deseem nodded. "It's a bit of a walk. I thought we would take our time getting over there and I've asked the servants to put together a basket for us. We'll rest there before coming back. It'll do you some good to get out and get some fresh air and Baxter will be happy. He keeps trying to lure you into taking him for a walk."

"I wouldn't ever..."

"It's okay if you wanted to. Just let me teach you some of the commands for him first. So, do you feel up for a walk?"

"Yes, my husband."

"Good. Let me get the basket from the other room." He stood up smoothly and for a moment thought the slender fingers curled lightly around his own tightened, almost as if Deseem was a little unwilling to let the contact go. It must have been in his head, the boy didn't flinch from being touched but he made no sign of welcoming it either.

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Chapter Thirty Three

The basket was set on the table just as he'd asked and Baxter glanced up from where he'd been splayed out, snoring, on his bed. "Come on boy, let's go for a walk." Simple words to have the big animal scrambling to his feet to trot, tongue lolling, into the bedroom as if he knew they had to collect Deseem to go.

Deseem was dressed and veiled, the cloth covering not only his hair but the lower part of his face as well. It didn't matter, his eyes were smiling as he scratched the dog's ears. It didn't seem to matter to Deseem that the short fine dog hair was getting all over his very fine Bastion dress.

"Ready?"

Deseem stood up. "Yes, my husband."

They weren't even out of the garden that was behind their rooms before Liam noticed a problem. "Please, don't walk behind me."

"Husband?"

"Beside me, please, here, we walk beside each other." He glanced back and waited until Deseem took the first few bold steps to stand beside him. "Better." He nodded. "And you don't have to keep your eyes down. We've some of the prettiest gardens anywhere, some beautiful buildings. I like to watch the people walking around. Miss half of everything with your eyes down."

"I...it feels wrong."

"But it is okay, I promise you it is. Look around at all the people, you'll see it is for yourself." He tried not to stare to see if Deseem was able to watch around them but he did occasionally glance over and he studied the boy as much as he could from the corner of his eyes. It took a little bit but soon golden eyes were darting up to steal glimpses and as they wandered toward more populated areas actually lifted long enough to look around.

"That's the building my dorm room was in when I was a trainee. Top floor too, Lach saw to that, I ran up and down those stairs so often I thought my legs would fall off." He spoke gently and pointed out different buildings and places but kept the pace slow.

"I miss it when I'm not home." Liam heard himself saying. "Not the people and politics and that but this... The valley and the gardens and the buildings, being able to sit in a quiet corner and watch so much activity. Must sound dull to you."

"No, not at all."

"What was it like for you, before...? What did you do all day?"

No one had ever asked him anything like that. Everyone in his life had always known what he did and now that he was wed, everyone would know what he was supposed to be doing. "It would sound dull to you, my husband."

"Maybe but I'd still like to know." He smiled but when he glanced over, Deseem's eyes were down again.

"I was to be a priest, before I was to be a bride. So I was cloistered." The ring on his finger was still an odd weight and he spun it around and around as he struggled to speak freely about himself. "I had a lot of lessons."

"And when not in lessons? What did you enjoy?"

"Sitting alone, in my garden. There was a hollow place between plants and I could slip between them and read."

"You liked to read?"

"Wives aren't to read."

"Well, my husband shall if he wishes it, as he's able. Here wives are whatever they wish to be. I'll take you to the library tonight, if you're up for it, and you can bring home whatever you'd like to read while I'm working. I'm sure we can find some quiet hollow between plants in our garden and Baxter can keep you company."

"Thank you, my husband but I can't, it makes me ill now, wives shouldn't read."

The cleansing and it made Liam ill to think that the one thing the boy had enjoyed and been allowed had been locked away from him. "Well, then how about this. Until Jas can undo that, I'll read whatever you'd like to you before we go to bed. If you'd like that. I know it's not the same but..."

"No," Deseem broke in. "I'd like that, a lot, thank you." He licked his lips in nerves and swallowed hard. "I miss it." He finally confessed.

"I would too, if it was taken from me." He was grateful they'd reached the start of the trail and for the distraction it offered. "See this here? The marker with black on it? This is a private trail, for Watcher's mostly but no one will come here without express need. You're a prince of Corena now, there is no place you can't go if you wish it."

The path they had been on was paved in set stones and well tended with plants and small groomed shrubs but the start of the trail with the black marker was anything but. It was narrow, barely wide enough for two and was simply hard packed dirt. Instead of small, low plants, tall shrubs had grown, some reaching up and joining to form arches over head. It would obscure anyone on the path from easy sight and it made the trail look shadowed and uninviting. When Liam turned them to go down that path, Deseem wasn't sure he wanted to follow. His steps faltered and it was only seeing Baxter leap so eagerly down the darkened walkway that convinced him to keep his feet moving.

"Things were different here, Deseem. I don't know how much you know, how much of what you know is even truth but I would hope you believe me. Corena the first, when she held together her father's kingdom it was only because the mercenary groups banded behind her. Her army was almost entirely for hire and yet they fought for her for years with little to no outright pay and when she won and earned peace most of those units became absorbed into the army. Most of them are still there, the Red Arrows, the Broken Shields, they're still considered the elite squads of our military. All but the Black Masks, they were a mercenary unit made up of fighters with magical talent. Which I know must sound silly to you, Bastion draws no distinction between fighters with magic and those without but the Age of Chaos hit us far harder than it did your people and here there was and still is a great deal of fear of people with strong talents going mad and wrecking havoc. The idea of an entire military unit with magic scared most people senseless but Corena the first knew that she'd won because of them and she had magic herself and was a quiet

member of the Black Masks as well." He glanced over but Deseem's eyes were down again. "Boring you?"

"No, my husband."

That made him smile a little. "I'm told I can be a windbag so stop me if I go to far." He waited but while Lach would have taken the opening to verbally spar with him, Deseem just moved in slow, careful steps beside him. "So, anyway, a compromise was reached. Corena and the Black Masks were already stationed here, in Corinth on the doorstep of the enchanted woods everyone feared. She met with the elders of the forest and they granted their blessing and protection. She swore the Black Masks and her kingdom would do everything in their power to help protect and safeguard their people and in exchange they would oversee the Watchmen, the unit the Black Masks became. They would guard the Watchers as the Watcher guard them and so they became known as the Guardians and we as Watchers. No one, not even someone born a prince, can be given the title and rank of Watcher, Deseem. It can't be bought or bribed or threatened. Someone from the heart of the Verdain swamps is as worthy as someone born in the palace.

"The Guardians choose us. The mask pendent? Is given to us by them, it's not entirely metal, it changes size. It can't be removed by force. So long as this pendant is in place, we are Watcher and worthy. No amount of training, education, magic is enough, they are picking people that are honest and honorable, people that they can trust with their own offspring and with the kingdom. Every Watcher, Deseem, is in line of succession. No one, no matter who their parents are, may sit on the throne of Corena without being a Watcher and within the Guardians trust. So an invading force could kill every cousin and kin in my line, slaughter every Watcher they find and so long as one of us breathes, Corena survives. The Guardians are elusive, they stay here in their forest and up in the Northern Mountains, interact very seldomly with humans.

"To become a Watcher, you must have magic. That is the first requirement and any with any talent for it is welcome to come here twice a year. They become trainees. Here they learn and work toward the rank in their magic, a Healer can earn the rank of Healer but not Watcher, they're separate but if they come for Watcher training they must learn both." He sighed. "Watcher training is tough, it's physically, mentally, emotionally exhausting, it's designed to grind a trainee down. It's designed to prepare them for being a Watcher which is much more difficult than even training can prepare you for. It's designed to be hard so that those without the drive wash out. Hundreds arrive every spring and fall and yet only a few handful ever become Watcher. Every trainee is equal, they all start out the same and no one can tell a trainee they're ready to be a Watcher."

"How do...how did you know?"

"Me?" He sighed. "I don't know. I knew I didn't have a choice that I had to be ready. A trainee has to ask permission of the Guardians to enter the forest and be judged. You can only ask three times so if you ask too soon you'll never be a Watcher. When you think you're ready you have to come here, alone, and walk down this path. Feels a lot longer of a walk when you're scared silly about reaching the end." The path actually wound around the side of a garden that was pressed to the side of a quiet old wing of the palace. It was just a stones throw from the forest's edge.

Sunlight began to spill down the shadowed path, marking it's end as approaching and Baxter took off full speed to reach it. The hedgerow didn't end, it merely widened out to form a rounded bowl of open grass and dead ended against the line of trees where the forest simply stopped growing. The old growth trees stood with thick proud trunks and wide reaching branches that rustled against each other in the breeze. In the center of the clearing, under one trees wide branches was a single white stone that jutted from the earth.

"I always liked this clearing. It always felt..." He drew a breath and glanced around, seeing with eyes that weren't flesh the odd energies in the rocks and plants. "It just feels secure here.

"Anyway, a trainee has to make the choice when to ask for entrance. Since they only get three chances to ask and then they have to walk down that long, lonely, path by themselves to here, to this clearing, well, they tend to think it over long and hard before making the attempt." It felt odd to speak Bastion at the literal edge of the Guardian forest. "When a trainee thinks they're ready to be accepted, they come here and place their hand on this rock. If the print remains on the rock, they're invited to enter the forest and face judgment."

"I don't understand."

Liam smiled. "Does sound odd doesn't it? Here, it's okay, place your hand on the rock."

Deseem stepped closer to the large smooth looking white stone he hesitated.

"Really, it's okay, it won't react to you, you're not a declared trainee."

Carefully, Deseem extended his hand and let his fingertips brush the smooth white surface. The stone felt shivery and warm but otherwise like any other common stone. It didn't bite him, no one scolded him and he placed his full hand on the rock.

"Leave it there." Liam came up beside Deseem and placed his own hand firmly on the rock. "Now lift your hand from it." He waited until Deseem removed his hand before taking his away. The boy's hand left no mark but where Liam's hand had been pressed to the rock an after image black hand print remained.

"How..."

"I don't know, it's tied to the magic of the Guardians. I have Stonecyphering and I can't figure it out. It'll fade but any Watcher that touches this stone will show the mark. A trainee will either see no change at all like your hand left or an outline of their hand in black instead of the full hand print mine left. If they see the outline they continue into the woods where they'll be challenged and judged by the Guardians."

"Challenged and judged?"

"Something no Watcher speaks of, it's...it's different for everyone but not pleasant. It's like they turn you inside out and check every fiber of your being. If the trainee sees the outline of their hand they must enter the woods without delay. They'll emerge as a Watcher with the mask pendent about their neck or with the pendent on their wrist as a bracelet which is the Guardian's way of saying they're accepted into our ranks but need more training, or..."

"Or?"

"Or they never emerge from the forest."

"Your Guardians kill them?"

Liam shrugged. "I don't know. It doesn't occur often but it does occur. No bodies are ever found. Most trainees come here in their third or fourth years of study and become accepted. When they're ready to be Watcher they'll just wake up and have the mask at their neck not their wrist. It's a little disconcerting."

"So, to be a Watcher, you came here and asked for invite to the forest, saw your hand print on the this rock and went down that path and these creatures, these Guardians approved you?" He wasn't sure if he was being mocked or not.

"Yes. Being a Watcher isn't just a military title, yes we're fighters but we're also entrusted with the care of the people. We can speak for the crown if we have to, settle disputes and troubles in

local regions. We're highly trained with our magic and so could be a major threat and yet aren't. They judge us for honor and honesty and trustworthiness. If ever one of us loses those qualities the mask..." he found himself touching the mask at his own throat. "It shatters. When one of us dies the Guardians always know. It's one of the few times they'll come from the forest, to confirm a death. Any Watcher you meet, you can trust. You are a Prince of Corena and they will lay down their life to protect you from harm." And far too many of them did lay down their lives, every year. Deseem's brow was crinkled up in thought but he didn't look like he entirely believed what he was being told. "It's okay, I don't expect you to believe me, so I wanted to introduce you to the Guardians."

That snapped Deseem's eyes up from where the black hand print was slowly fading on the rock's surface. "What?"

"It's okay, if they hadn't wished us to enter I'd know and everyone that marries into the royal family eventually has to meet the Guardians. It isn't required but it is the respectful thing to do."

"But what if... what if they..."

Liam reached over and took Deseem's hand. "It'll be okay. There's a clearing just over the first hill. It'll be beautiful this time of year with the leaves all changing. We'll picnic there and rest, one of them will be by when they're ready."

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Chapter Thirty Four

Baxter had darted into the tree line only to turn and bark at them as if to ask what was keeping them. It didn't matter, Deseem really didn't notice. He was too caught up in the feel of his husband's hand in his own, warm and rough and solid. It felt good, really good to have that casual touch and he followed when it tugged lightly on him. On their own, his fingers curled around Liam's hand and he held tight to that contact as he was lead into the woods.

Liam had exaggerated a little it wasn't one short hill over but several, deeper into the forest than most people were willing to tread. He should have picked a spot closer to the edge of the woods because walking a smooth level path and climbing over the side of the gently rolling hills of the woods were different things. Deseem may have been doing better but he wasn't up for a hike. By the time the boy stumbled a little and he thought they might be better to turn back, Liam noticed they were closer to the clearing than anything else.

He caught the boy's elbow. "It's not much further." He was being honest this time and they soon were walking down into a gentle clearing. An old tree had fallen and a large hole had been created in the overhead canopy. The grasses below were dying back with fall and some of the leaves from the broadleaf trees had already dropped. "Here we are." Liam walked them into the

center of the clearing and put the basket down. "Wait let me get the blanket out." He pulled it from the basket and flicked it open, surprised to find the blanket was long but not overly wide. The servants had packed them a courting blanket, one designed to make the couple sit close together and should they lay down to rest, almost forced them to cuddle close to be comfortable. He tried not to frown at it, they were married after all.

Deseem didn't need any further prompting, he lowered himself gratefully to the blanket trying to hide how exhausted the walk had made him.

"May not have been the best idea, asking you to walk so far. You have to be exhausted, I'm sorry."

"I'm well, my husband."

Liam whistled for Baxter and the dog came bounding back to them. "Baxter guard." He ordered and the dog moved again but this time he stayed close by, sniffing about the clearing. "Here, lunch will wait. It could be a few moments or hours before one of the Guardians has time to see us. Let's lay down and rest, the sun is warm, best way to nap is in a sunbeam." Mentioning sleep made him yawn and he caught a shy smile from Deseem before the boy was struggling to hide his own yawn, his veil had slipped a little and he hadn't seemed to notice.

The last thing Liam was going to do was point out the fabric had slipped, he'd happily burn all the boy's veils if he thought he could get away with it. Instead he just laid down on the blanket and rolled his shoulders until he settled on the grass softened ground under the blanket. He could sleep on cold rock if he had to and the warm sunlight, soft blanket and grass below felt as good as any bed. The blanket didn't seem as soft a bed to Deseem. The boy laid down and turned to a side before squirming a little and trying to get comfortable on his back.

"Here, I'm used to sleeping on the ground, come here." He reached an arm out and gently pulled the slender boy against him. Deseem lay tense against him for a moment before he sighed and with a few deeper breaths he relaxed, his head pillowed half on Liam's shoulder half on his chest. "Better?" He tried to tell himself it wasn't anything important, he would have offered the more comfortable means of sleeping to anyone. If he was going to be honest he would have admitted how good it felt to have another warm body curled against him.

Deseem nodded against his husband and liked when the arm curled around his back. "Husband?"

"Yes?"

"Why are you being nice to me?"

He wanted to laugh the question off as ridiculous but he could tell by the uncertainty in the quiet voice Deseem meant it. "You're my husband and, besides, you haven't done anything to deserve anything but kindness." He rested his hand on a lean shoulder. "You're not used to being treated with kindness?"

Deseem turned his face down a little. "I am treated as is deemed proper for me."

"Well..." and didn't that small voice just about break his heart. "From now on it's deemed proper that you're treated with kindness." It made him wonder what other abuses the boy had endured. "Deseem, I know someone used to beat you, I know they've hurt you. It's not going to happen again so you'd better get used to being treated kindly."

The boy didn't say anything but his hand fisted up into the front of Liam's uniform and he clung on tightly. Liam shut his eyes and let the sunlight filter down on them. He wasn't sure what to do with Deseem but he had a couple of years to get the boy straightened out. Really, now that he

was actually speaking sentences he wasn't all that much of a bother. He sighed and pulled the drowsy boy into a more comfortable position and let his mind drift into hazy rest.

Something tickled his nose and Liam batted it away, coming awake from gentle sleep to see what was pestering him. Normally it was Baxter but this time the dog was stretched out on the side of him that Deseem hadn't claimed. He half opened his eyes, Deseem still pillowed on his shoulder and Baxter's large head resting on a thigh but a shadow loomed over him. Normally that would have startled him badly but here, in this forest, the shadow could be from only one source.

He pried his eyes open and frowned as the blade of grass tickled his nose again. "Don't make me sneeze."

"You could have the dignity to be impressed."

Liam snorted. "You're not even an elder, when you become one I swear I'll be impressed." He glanced down and met Baxter's eye but Deseem hadn't stirred. "Some guard dog."

"He likes us. Might I say, you two make quite the pretty sight, napping out here."

He watched as the Guardian with his smooth deep, blue skin so dark it was midnight shadow dark openly studied where they slept. The tips of his fangs peeked out when he grinned and ears, large and slightly pointed poked higher than his bald head. "He's still asleep because of your doing?"

One blue shoulder shrugged. "Wanted a word with you first."

"You look well, Fen. Wasn't sure you were here or out in the world."

"Been back for a while. You look a sight better than the last we met. I was hoping to be around when you finally brought him to be introduced. We heard of the troubles you've been having." One clawed hand carefully extended out to pluck a stray lock of hair away from Deseem's sleeping face. "He's cute, I guess, for a human. Damaged though."

"We're working on that."

"So I see. Huh, touch starved too, I never will understand you humans, you're so mean to each other." He grinned again and white fangs flashed. "I understand, wake him up and I'll do the spooky great Guardian thing with him."

"Not too much, he's...fragile."

Fen snorted. "Babies want to know if you and Baxter will play while I poke at this one?" He nodded toward the edge of the clearing.

Liam looked as much as he could while laying flat on his back and saw several young Guardians, barely mid-thigh high on Liam's long legs. They peered around trees and giggled. "Sure." He smiled, for some reason younger Guardians had always liked him. It was a high honor, the Guardians were very, very protective of their children. Most humans had never even seen an immature Guardian but even as a young boy, Liam had played tag with them. Fen had been almost friendly with him when they were both children.

"Deseem?" Liam shrugged his shoulder a little and petted the boy's cloth covered hair. "Deseem?"

The younger man muttered a little and gripped tighter to Liam's shirt. "y husband?"

"Can you wake up? One of the Guardians has come to see you...."

Deseem nuzzled closer and muttered again.

"Aww cute, he cuddles..."

"Fen be nice." It didn't surprise him that the Guardian teased in Bastion. He wasn't surprised by anything a Guardian knew or was able to do any more. "Deseem..."

Golden eyes peeked open, blinked blearily. Deseem had slept wonderfully, better than even napping with Baxter. He was tired from the long walk and laying down, resting against the warmth of his husband, listening to his heart beat slow and steady below his ear had soothed him. He was finding he liked touch, even the most casual touch, even when Jas or Jan patted his shoulder or touched his arm. He'd been comfortable and felt secure in their sunbeam and unwilling to wake from his nap.

When he did pry his eyes open something from a nightmare was crouched down next to them. The white's of it's eyes were vivid in comparison to the deep true blue of it's skin which had a moist soft, supple look to it. The bald head was smooth and hairless and points of long ears stood up and out a little. Fangs, pointed and thick peeked from between mobile lips that were curled back in a grin as if the being delighted in shocking with it's appearance. Simple clothing, plainly cut but dyed an deep goldenrod shade hung from it's body. It's hands were long and slender but where a human's useless flat nails would be round pointed claws barely tipped from it's flesh. As Deseem's eyes focused on them they slid out a little, extending slightly to show they were deadly sharp and long.

For a moment, Deseem was still with raw fear before he scrambled up and back. His hands digging into the blanket searching for purchase to pull himself further away. Worse, Liam just lay where he'd napped and looked a little surprised not at the monster on the edge of their blanket but at Deseem's wide eyed fear. Even Baxter barely lifted his head but he turned clever eyes on Deseem not the creature.

"Oh Holy Father, God of all, God of my ancestors, hear my prayer, a child of your covenant, protect me from the darkness of the shadows, shield me from the evil that lurks seen and unseen..." He closed his eyes and found the prayer tumbling from his lips in his fear.

"Lurking evil?" Fen grinned.

"Deseem, no, it's okay." Liam sat up making Baxter whine in protest. He moved and gathered the boy's hands up between his own, they were cold to the touch. "Deseem, open your eyes, look at me..." He made sure he knelt fully in front of the poor fellow, blocking any view of Fen before the golden eyes cracked open. "Fen is a Guardian, he's not going to hurt you, it's okay. I know they look frightening but really, it's okay."

"I only eat souls on odd numbered days." Fen teased and tried not to laugh.

Liam shot him a look. "Not helping."

Deseem glanced over Liam's shoulder at the grinning creature and saw amusement and mirth in the lighter blue eyes. "G...good....good thing for me it's an even numbered day..." He managed to whisper out, his voice shaking a little still but hoping he was judging things correctly.

Fen paused mid-chuckle and Liam turned to glance back at Deseem. The boy hadn't even seemed to understand humor in the month they'd been married and he cracked his first joke in the face of meeting a Guardian for the first time. Behind him Fen snorted and broke into full out laughter and patted Liam on the shoulder.

"Well now, that was unexpected!" Fen moved to sit on the blanket. "If you're done praying to your god to smote my evil lurkingness, maybe we could have a chat?"

He swallowed and didn't feel quite the same fluttery fear he had at first looking at the creature. Very carefully Deseem nodded.

"Good, now, Liam, get lost."

Liam gave the hands he was holding a gentle squeeze before he let them go. "It's okay, I'll just be across the clearing getting trounced by a couple of kids." He stood up and Baxter hopped up to follow him. "I'll just be over there." Liam nodded before giving Fen a warning look and moving with a quick step to the edge of the clearing.

Deseem watched as Baxter leapt about and a good half dozen small versions of the odd creature sitting next to him squealed in delighted mock fear and ran around. Liam made a teasing roaring sound and chased after them until two of them leapt and landed on his back and he tumbled into the grass to be swarmed by the group, all of them laughing.

"Most of our children have a natural distrust of humans but every time Liam comes to visit every child not in lessons or chores wants to come pounce on him." Fen grinned. "I think it's the fact that he's an Elemental, makes him almost like us. Good you're not looking like I'm going to bite your head off."

"My husband wouldn't let you hurt me." Deseem answered as boldly as he could.

"I believe he would defend you too." Fen glanced over to where Liam was back on his feet, a child on each ankle being dragged and one hanging from his neck. "Now, Deseem, let me see you."

Deseem glanced up and shivered at the dark serious look on the bizarre creatures face. "What?"

"Shh..." Fen reached up with his hands and cupped the sides of Deseem's face, keeping the boy from dropping his chin again and lowering his eyes. "That's it..." He whispered softly. "Let me see you..."

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Chapter Thirty Five

Liam tripped again and soon was prying tickling, giggling blue skinned children from his body. They were smart enough to tackle as a group and when Guardian children rough housed they could play rough. He'd gotten clawed and bitten before when they forgot his skin wasn't as tough as their own but there never was any malice in it. They were better with it now but that didn't

mean they weren't strong and stubborn.

He pried them off well enough to glance over and check on Deseem. The boy sat with his face between Fen's hands his golden eyes locked onto Fen's blue. The Guardian was good, strong, both his parents were Elders and he would be too one day. He trusted Fen far more than he trusted most humans and he knew for all the Guardians teasing jokes he was worthy of that trust. It worried him a little that Fen was having such a deep look at the boy but he had to trust that he would be gentle.

Two of the kids leapt and landed full across his stomach and Liam omphed most of the air out of his lungs. He coughed and sputtered. "I surrender! I surrender!" He chuckled and rolled the little devils off of him. "How about we see how well Baxter can fetch?" That made them nod and cheer and made his ribs hurt less. Better, it would keep him from being tackled and unable to keep an eye on Deseem.

Fen's fingertips were surprisingly warm against his face, the sharp points of his retracted claws were a cool counterpoint in accented little dots on his skin. Sitting so close and now alone with the Guardian he could see he was more human looking than monster. The eyes were bright and expressive and even the points of the fangs didn't seem so unusual now and he thought the Guardian would look odd without them. Deseem locked eyes with the unusual being and suddenly felt the world drop out from under him.

It wasn't a frightening feeling. On the contrary it felt safe just odd. Suddenly he felt the enormous power folded up inside of the odd creature, the depth to which that power ran. It connected everything in the woods together. Threads of it tied every Guardian everywhere together in an invisible thin web and more extended outward and lightly touched each Watcher. It was like all their collective magic and power was interconnected and focused on not only their survival but in securing those they'd confirmed to be Watcher. It stole his breath with the wonder

Until that power was literally focused on him. It made Deseem feel suddenly very small. Those blue eyes scoured over him, across him, seemed to look under his skin. It felt like he'd been turned inside out. There was no pain, only a soft gentle warmth like sleeping in the sunbeam had felt like but it felt shockingly intimate. That combined nearly divine feeling power made him shiver.

Fingertips slid away from his face and the sharp points dragging his face lightly. "Well you are the interesting thing aren't you?"

Deseem knew he was trembling now but for once it wasn't in fear but rather in sheer awe. "You're...it's...what he said, it's real...about how they're picked..."

"Promoted. They pick themselves, every human that comes here for training makes the choice. We just weed out the ones that wouldn't be able to stand under such high ideals." Fen reached out and slipped the veil the rest of the way down from where it had slipped from Deseem's head. "Ask, if I can I shall answer."

The offer surprised him but he suddenly knew that the Guardian wouldn't lie to him. He glanced over his shoulder to where Liam was laughing and Baxter was hopping on his back feet. When he glanced back the blue head was tilted a little to the side. "Is it true?"

"Is what true?"

He didn't know how to ask, there was so much that had changed. "All he says, is it true?"

Fen sighed. "I knew your husband when we were both still children. Liam would sneak into the

woods and we'd play. Even then, even as a small boy, he was always honest, often to his detriment. I see no sign he is even attempting to deceive you. If he's told you something, it is true."

"He..." Deseem shook his head. "He says he doesn't wish me to be a wife but...but...it's all I know... I want to please him."

That made Fen smile lightly. If anyone deserved someone wanting to please them it was Liam. "What has he asked you to do, to please him?"

"He wants to know what I think."

"Horrible of him to care to know if you're okay or not. Be honest with him and all will be well. You're in good hands with him and I believe he's in good hands with you. Don't forget that, he's as lost and hurt as you are and in some ways far more so." Fen nodded. "There are many beautiful things about your people Deseem, many beautiful aspects to your culture but also many that the people here will find disturbing. No man is forced to pretend to be a woman to marry another man. No one here is cloistered against their will and no one is owned." He reached out and slipped the veil fully from the boy's shoulders. "Give yourself time but if you wish to please him, stop trying to be something you aren't and start being yourself. He'll respond to that."

Deseem glanced to Liam again and quickly back to the Guardian. "He won't be angry? Disappointed?"

"No, in fact you may be surprised at how well he responds." Fen smiled to himself. "Brats!" He called out and slid his eyes over to the human. "Stop pulling his hair!" He spared one last pat to the boy's shoulder before he stood up. "Come brats, you've lessons."

There was a chorus of disappointed groans but soon the little ones crawled off of Liam. Fen clapped his hands and shooed at them and slowly the children tramped off into the woods clumping up to giggle and chatter together. He offered a hand to Liam and helped the human back to his feet.

"Not bleeding I see."

Liam brushed leaves and grass from his uniform. "Naw, they played fair." He glanced over to where Deseem sat on the blanket, hands folded demurely in his lap, his veil pooled about him instead of over his hair. "Everything okay?"

Fen nodded. "He's a sweet boy, you two are surprisingly well suited for each other. He's welcome here anytime. The Elders will be pleased. Father's been worried about you, says you should have been made to find another mate sooner."

"Deseem isn't...we're not..." Liam felt himself blushing and he cleared his throat. "I don't even know if he's the least bit kree but we're stuck with each other so I'd like to find a way to be his friend. Couldn't do that with him so scared all the time."

"He understands the nature of our relationship now, what he does with it..." Fen shrugged.

"Will you be staying? Going to have some lunch before the walk back."

"No." He hid a smile and knew the two should be left alone. "No, I should get the munchkins back for their lessons. Good to see you looking so well, Liam. Good to see."

"Good to be well. Thank you, for doing this and being gentle with him."

"Welcome." He bobbed his head and stepped to the tree line.

Even watching him go, Liam lost sight of the Guardian within a few steps. One step he was literally there and the next he was gone, as if the forest had opened up and swallowed him. It was disconcerting and Liam tried not to think about it. "Kids wore me out too, Baxter boy." He patted the dog's shoulder and let his tongue loll.

Deseem was still sitting still but he'd drawn the veil up to wrap around his fingers. "So..." Liam sighed as he lowered himself back down onto the blanket. "That was Fen. A lot of the younger Guardians go about in the world, and there's a sizable population up North, since so many of them were slaughtered during the occupation in Rosen's time they tend to not want too many in one place. Fen actually saved my life, after you freed me. I was really sick, my wounds were infected and after Dorena... well I was mad with fever. Collapsed in the wilderness and woke to Fen rushing me to help. Doubt I would have lived to make it to a Healer if I'd been moved at a slower pace. If he was human I'd call him a friend but that would annoy a Guardian." He grinned and pulled the basket closer to them. "Hmm honey wine..."

"Husband?" Deseem asked softly.

"Yes?"

"Do you wish me veiled?"

He carefully placed the tumbler of poured wine on the uneven blanket near Deseem. "If it makes you feel better, I can accept you wearing it but it isn't my wish to have you veiled or dressed as a woman or cloistered away. Those things are designed to keep a spouse from being desired by someone else but Deseem..." He glanced up and saw worry and uncertainty in the boy's face. "Well that's a conversation about our relationship for another time. Just let's leave it there, I don't have any wish or desire to have you locked away from other people's eyes. I trust you as you."

Deseem rubbed the red marked scar on his hand. "I hate it." He heard himself whispering. "I hate it so much."

Golden eyes darted up and Liam saw trapped desperation in them. "Deseem..."

"I...I don't want to be a woman...I want my life back...I...I...can't...I..." He couldn't breathe. He was wheezing in tight short breathed gasps and it was only getting worse.

Hands pulled at him and Deseem didn't fight them. He was drawn against Liam, his head tucked against the taller man's chest for the second time that day. Strong arms wrapped around him and held him close. Hands petted his shoulders and hair and Deseem found himself reaching out and clinging to Liam like a man drowning.

"Shhh it's okay...it's okay..." Liam soothed and petted the slender body and was surprised by how good it made him feel to hold Deseem close. "I'm sorry Deseem, I am, I'm sorry you're stuck with me. Shhhh, it's okay, it's going to be okay..."

The rumbling hushed deep voice lowered to such tender tones and the petting soothing hands were better than any magic at settling him. Even the scent of Liam soothed him and when the breeze puffed some of the fine white hair fluttered against one of the hands he had clutched into the black uniform.

The words sunk in and Deseem felt himself shaking his head. "No... no my husband no... you're...you're one of the best things that's happened to me." He glanced up when the hands soothing him stilled and fell into wide blue eyes. "You're...I...I just want to make you happy. I don't want to fail you..." One of Liam's hands rose up and brushed work roughened fingertips across his face and Deseem shivered in spite of the warm sunbeam they still sat in. "Husband, I...I like it when you touch me." It was utterly immodest to say but it was the truth and more so all

the time. Liam had been so gentle on their wedding night but had hardly touched him since and not at all in that way but even the very casual touch Liam occasionally granted him made him feel so good.

Liam was thinking thoughts he had no place or right to think. Deseem felt so good in his arms. The boy just seemed to fit and he liked the way he felt, liked the way his hair smelled when it tickled his face. He liked the way his skin looked next to Deseem's and the little sputtery snores the boy made when soundly asleep. Even more than all of that he liked the way those golden eyes looked up at him, suddenly so bold and honest, so hungry for contact and more. It was the lack of fear in those eyes, perhaps for the first time, that made Liam's heart stutter in its beat.

He wanted to kiss the slightly parted lips. It wasn't so long ago and Liam hadn't forgotten how responsive Deseem was to being kissed. He wanted to press his mouth to the other man's, tease them both. He wanted to lay Deseem down to the blanket and do more than kiss him. The dress Deseem always wore was absurd but it would make running his hands under the fabric, up the bare skin of the boy's legs so much easier.

Liam drew a long slow deep breath and brushed a stray curl back from Deseem's face. "Touch is a good thing..." he forced a smile. "In case you didn't notice we tend to hug everyone we care about. I can't imagine what it was like to be raised without that."

Deseem wasn't sure how to answer that so he just blinked and waited, hoping his husband would lean down those last few inches and cover his mouth with those gentle lips.

"Well, you must be hungry, should we see what they packed us for lunch?" He couldn't care if live snakes were tucked away in the basket but unless he got Deseem out of his arms and away from him he wasn't going to be able to control himself.

Deseem nodded and moved to unload the basket. He tried to hide his frown at the kiss that didn't occur and focus on getting their food out for them to share.

"And the veil and dress and trying to be a woman and wife? Only if you wish it Deseem. It matters not at all to me. I like being able to see when you smile." He forced one of his own and tried not to wonder how the other man's touch would feel against his skin as he watched the slender, graceful hands setting out their lunch. Maybe Lach had been right, maybe he did need a trip into the city.

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Chapter Thirty Six

"Watcher Bishick, thank you for making time during your day." Liam nodded when he opened the door and the dark haired Watcher came in. Even with the man's bloodlines he was Watcher and

Liam had told him he didn't need to knock but Bishick continued to anyway.

"No troubles at all, most of my classes are in the morning or later afternoon. This works out well for me. Are you sure, however, it's wise? I can barely get a response with you in the room..."

Liam nodded. "I took him to meet the Guardians. He's still having issues with anxiety but he believes now in the trustworthiness of Watchers. Jas is coming by later, about when you should be finishing up and she'll stay with him until I return. I have no doubt he's safe to be left alone but she's still nervous. It was actually his idea to have you here alone with him for the lesson. I think he wants to test himself but he did request you stay outside in full public view."

"Still thinks I'm going to molest him while your back is turned."

"And that I'll beat him for it if you did."

"I was worried when I'd heard the news, thank you for writing me personally."

Liam shrugged. "I know I've been distant with you..."

"You weren't what I'd call warm and friendly when you were my student either but since you were in my first class, I should thank you. I haven't had a more stubborn student since you so it's all been easy since." He laughed warmly. "You straightened the books."

"Oh, yes. He's trying but..."

"I've heard stories of cleansings, it'll be a tough road but we've the best Soulhealers anywhere."

He nodded. "It's easier knowing a lot of this isn't his choice. At least now I have some idea how to help him. Here have to go out the garden door." He opened the door and held it open for Bishick. Deseem sat bundled on a blanket tossing a stick for Baxter.

"He's not veiled."

"He's still wearing it about his shoulders but not wrapping up in it."

"Major step." Bishick grinned. "My mother has lived in Corena for almost thirty years, she still keeps her hair covered. When my sister married and stopped wearing a veil, she about had a heart attack she threw such a fit."

"It must have been quite the shock for her."

"And my sister's kids? They barely can speak Bastion. Still can curse in it but that's because my sister has a temper." He grinned. "It's a good thing you're doing Liam, what you've done. Sealing the treaty, being kind to him... I know it must not be easy."

That made Liam nod. "Watcher's lives rarely are. I'd just be grateful if you can get him speaking Trade." They were almost up to where Deseem sat, his spine a little too straight and he was visibly nervous.

"When I'm done with him, he'll be reading it too. Just you wait."

"Thanks." He smiled gently and switched to Bastion. "I'm going to my class now, Deseem. Are you okay?"

"I will be well, my husband, thank you for your concern."

"Good... well, send for me if you need me..."

"We will but I think Deseem will be fine." Bishick smiled, wondering if Liam was more nervous than Deseem. He stayed standing as Liam left, Baxter hopping along after him. "Well, I would say thank you for trusting me but I've a feeling it's more to do with the Guardians than anything I've done. May I sit?"

Deseem glanced up, drew a deep breath and nodded.

"Thank you." He sat and studied the nervous tense way Deseem held himself. "If I'd been born a little further south, you would have been my Prince before the marriage. I was born in Corena, my parents were born in Bastion. I know, or at least have an idea, of how difficult this is for you."

"It will please my husband." Deseem said softly, eyes down, part of him was still cowering inside waiting to be beaten for being so bold.

Bishick nodded. "It will but it'll please him because it'll help you adjust to being here easier. Have you wondered why he hasn't tried to teach you Trade?"

"My husband has his reasons."

"But you haven't asked." He smiled at that but Deseem was looking down and didn't see. "Liam learned Bastion like...well like he absorbed it instead of learned it. I've never had a student learn like that. He's a knack for languages. Speaks Fisher like a native, Clanspeak, Bastion, Verdain enough to get by, Nomad and Brigshian too. I'm sure he's picked up a bits and parts of others along the way. He's a brilliant student but has absolutely no patience to teach. I asked him to tutor another trainee, he made her cry." He chuckled a little. "Poor thing almost quit the class, he wasn't trying to be mean. It's just, Liam knows it in his head and can't explain it clearly to others. He's not a teacher, figured it would save you both a great deal of stress if I offered to help." He sighed and glanced around the garden. "I do understand how difficult this is for you, even without the cleansing. I'd be honored to help you however I can. Even if you just wish someone other than Liam to talk to. It can get lonely in a place where so few can understand you."

The offer surprised Deseem. He wasn't used to having anyone to talk to but he'd seen it here. The servants even chattered together while they worked, laughing and enjoying each other's company. Liam too always seemed to be talking to someone as he came home but it was all things he'd never really had before. He wanted it, desperately, was hungry for it.

"I...I never really had anyone..." He tried to explain but felt his heart beating painfully and a sense of grief too deeply to keep speaking.

Bishick studied what he could of the down turned face. "Anyone to talk to?"

Deseem nodded.

Not for the first time was Bishick grateful to have been born on the Corena side of the border. "I was third son, just like you. I've three younger brothers too." His family hadn't been landed in Bastion and he wouldn't have been cloistered but the birth order was the same. "I can't imagine..." He didn't want to judge another way of life. "It must have been very lonely to grow up that way."

"I would have dinner with my sister, in the same garden."

"You must miss her. It must be difficult being so far from your family. I miss my siblings a great deal."

"I...my sister is no longer living." And his brother had traded him like a crate of silk and his father considered him a traitor and delighted in beating him. Deseem didn't miss his family but he

missed his sister deeply.

"I'm sorry."

"I don't think..." He found himself rubbing at his wrist and the healed line that was going to scar. "I don't think I'm a very good wife but I'm trying to be a good prince of your realm and a good partner to my husband. Please, I'd be grateful if you could help me do that."

That was a huge step and one not lost on Bishick He inclined his head, the only bow a Watcher gave anyone. "It would be my honor. Now, how about we teach you to say, husband, in Trade?"

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"God Liam you look like you've been trampled." Jas hopped to her feet and came over to check her cousin for injuries. His hair was a mess, his uniform torn and he was scuffed up and dirty.

"I'm fine, stop that." He shooed at her hands and let Baxter push past him to go to his food and water bowl. "We did hunt and evade today."

"And you showed them all up."

"Of course. No point in being soft on them. I may be bruised up but if anyone in that class can walk without wincing tomorrow I didn't do my job."

"Liam..."

"What? They didn't believe one person being clever could take the whole group. They needed this."

She smirked. "And you enjoyed it too."

His guilty half grin confirmed it.

"I swear, Liam, you're like a four year old boy, a naughty one at that." But she was half laughing as she scolded, just pleased he wasn't in such a dark mood.

"Baxter enjoyed it, too." The dog glanced at them, his tongue lolling out in a wide grin. "Where's Deseem?"

"I made him go lay down. He was exhausted. Trying to fix this is taking a lot out of him and he's still very weak. Watcher Biskick said he was quite co-operative with his lesson today but he was fairly quiet with me. It's not good that he's so quiet, I've been hoping he'd open up more."

"He has. It's almost like he's a different person. Or partly a different person. He still is quiet but he's talking to me now."

"Good! Very good start."

"Jas...can you...maybe...tell about him?"

"Tell?"

"If he's kree or not?"

"Oh." She glanced to the bedroom door. "You two really aren't...?"

"No!" He cleared his throat. "No. It didn't seem right."

"Talk to him about it?"

"I've tried and get no where. He's no frame of reference...I...Jas he's so beautiful. It'll be easier to sleep in the same bed with him if I know he's not kree."

"And if he is? Or if he's like you with an interest in men and women?"

"Can't you tell? You've been crawling all over inside his head, can't you tell these things?"

"It isn't so simple, Liam. We can't even talk so I can't judge his feelings with a carefully guided conversation. You would know better than I would and well, if it worries you, you're a man, there are ways to find out."

"Take him into the city?" The idea hadn't occurred to him but it made sense.

Jas raised an eyebrow but didn't disagree.

"He'd die of embarrassment."

"Maybe, but he is still a seventeen year old young man. You're not that many years removed from his age, you must remember what it was like."

"I was married."

"Please, I know for a fact you and Norlan visited a few houses with Dorena's blessing. And don't look all shocked at me, it doesn't suit you."

"That was different."

She just snickered and a tiny bit. She stood on tip toes to place a soft kiss to the side of his face. "I'm heading home, unless you need to talk?"

He shook his head. "I'm good, today was a good day."

"Wonderful, just, go take a bath. Isn't seemly a prince looking like a beggar."

"The uniform is far too fancy to belong to a beggar."

"But dirty enough now..."

"I clean up well."

"You do and that's my professional advice." She moved to the door and paused, a hand on the latch. "Another bit of advice? If he's agreeable, it wouldn't do either of you any harm to experiment a little."

"Jas!"

"Don't give me that look, it might send everyone else scurrying for cover but not me. We haven't been seeing him at his best. He's actually quite strong, quite smart. He may have been forced to become this timid thing but he's a mature young man under it all. You'll know if he has no interest and some of the worries you've been having will be laid to rest."

"And if he responds?"

Jas rolled her eyes at the heavy seriousness in Liam's tone. "How horrible to be married to a man you're attracted to that returns that attraction."

Her teasing didn't make him feel any better. "I didn't want this."

"And finding some contentment in the situation isn't a betrayal of her."

He just frowned.

"Think about it, and come over and see me soon, okay?"

Liam nodded. "I will." But he was agreeing without really thinking too much about it. One of his conditions to being returned to active duty after the war was to see a Soulhealer regularly and than as needed. He wasn't the only one, a great number of other veterans were under similar orders. It had never bothered him before but now he found he didn't want to share his thoughts, he wanted to hold them close and private.

He found himself nodding and agreeing and grateful for the silence of his room once he got the door shut behind her. The rooms were starting to feel more like home. His things were settled in and placed how he preferred instead of the forced perfection Deseem had been trying to impose and he had grown used to the situation. He was growing comfortable with the way the light filled the corners and the floorboard or two that squeaked even if he still missed the sound of the ocean at night.

Liam leaned against the wall and pulled his boots off with a muted grunt. They were dirty and he wasn't going to track dirt over Deseem's clean floors if he could help it. The boy was doing better but the rooms were still almost unnaturally clean. In his sock feet now he moved to the bedroom as quietly as he could without using even a touch of magic and for him that was pretty quite.

He slipped silently into the bedroom and across the room. The curtains over the door were pulled and Jas must have pulled some of them around the bed as well because Deseem never did. Bastion was too warm even in winter to require curtains around a bed at night but he would need them in Corinth. Especially in an older section of the palace like they were tucked in and with those glass doors to the garden, the room would get drafty this winter and he'd have to take care that Deseem learned how to dress for it.

The boy was curled up on the bed, knees almost drawn up to his chest. Liam paused with a soft smile and wondered if Deseem had ever seen snow before. He wasn't going to wake the boy and ask but he would have to check later. He didn't wish to disturb his sleep for something so trivial. Deseem looked so much younger when asleep, his face slack and smooth, one braid unraveling, the gauzy dress twisted around him.

He was beautiful. Liam sighed softly and shook his head. He was going to have to find a lover because he didn't deal well with frustration. He could deal with celibacy but Deseem was always so willing to please, so desperate for approval and while that was getting better seeing those golden eyes watching him made celibacy more difficult.

The only question was, could he in good conscious take a lover? Deseem wasn't a Watcher, he wasn't a Shaman and he was certainly not raised with their more relaxed views on marriage. He couldn't even talk to Deseem about it because he knew the conversation would simply be Deseem agreeing to whatever he said and Liam would never know if the man felt betrayed or not.

It was a silly worry. Liam stepped away from the bed and sleeping form to move to the bathroom

to get cleaned up and he shook his head at his own caution. He'd eventually have to take a lover, he couldn't spend the rest of his life celibate. Neither should Deseem for that matter, neither of them should stop living simply because they'd been forced to wed. Only, Deseem was no where near ready for that conversation and Liam sighed as he picked dry leaves and small twigs from his hair. He could survive another few months, or even a year or two, celibate.

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Chapter Thirty Seven

Deseem had saved his life, freed Dorena and the repercussions for the boy were still unknown but Liam had no doubt that there had been some. He owed Deseem more than his life and freedom, he owed him for every ounce of pain his mercy had drawn to him. Liam owed the boy more than he could state or count and maybe more than he could repay, it was a small thing to wait. It was a very small thing to be patient and careful and give the boy time to heal, even if their forced intimacy was a horrible temptation. He would wait and when it was possible see to it they both could find contentment and happiness in spite of their forced marriage.

Liam rolled his shoulders and stripped his uniform away. He twisted a little and a muscle in his back twinged. He must have pulled it but not badly enough to find a Healer, just enough that he knew he'd been stalking and hunting his fourth year trainees like an overgrown housecat. It had felt good. He'd only been home a short time but he'd missed that the most.

The Fisher coast was an odd contrast. The Fisher's themselves were a proud, pacifist community and caused little trouble while on land. Out at sea, if their ships were attacked, they fought like cornered lions and most pirates and the like knew better than to even attempt to take a Fisher crew while on their water. On land was another story and it wasn't without cause that people said a Fisher would apologize for bleeding on the person that knifed them.

There had been no lack of bandits, highwaymen, smugglers and the like moving along the winding cliff top roads and hiding in sea caves on his route of the Fisher coast. Trick had been to allow those that followed certain unspoken rules the Fisher's had established ages before and to hunt down and stop those that didn't or those that actually harmed innocent people. It had been a delicate balance with more shades of gray than black and white but he'd loved every moment.

Even the ones that had almost cost his life had made him happy. He was useful, keeping the balance between groups both sponsored by the Fisher communities and not, making sure no one got too out of control. He'd gotten to put his skills learned in battle to good use without having to be such a murdering bastard. His magic had been uniquely useful with the seasonal occurrence of destructive storms that he was able to tame. More so, his magic didn't frighten the Fishers and he found contentment and peace in their quiet ways.

Sadly, hunting, stalking, capturing, evading, tracking, hiding were all things not in everyday use

in Corinth, at least not for a man of his rank. It made the lesson of the day delightful and as he rubbed at a random bruise and got the shower water running he considered turning the tables for the next lesson. Maybe he should let them hunt him, track him through the woods. The whole pack of them should have some success in finding him, a couple of them were actually quite promising, and he'd have a tremendous amount of fun even if they managed to find him.

It would give him another day to come home tired and sore and dirty. He shouldn't delight in that feeling so much but he did. Something in his brain connected those feelings with being useful and not sitting around a palace listening to Senators blather about politics and trade treaties and taxes. He liked his hair getting knotted, liked dirt on his skin and his clothes smelling of horse and leather and fresh air. Liked working hard, being tired and strained and coming back to camp with a warm fire and full belly of food, maybe fall into some slightly scratchy travel blankets with a lover...one of the Gaardsmen he'd worked with. Someone with a rich laugh who enjoyed the hunt and work as much as he did and wasn't afraid of a man with deep, strong magic.

It didn't surprise Liam that when he thought about the past and situations, the lover his mind called up wasn't a woman. He'd had several female lovers since Dorena, since the war, and had enjoyed their companionship as much as he was able to. It was only that after hunting down bandits, smugglers, tracking down those that would do harm, he preferred to tumble into a bedroll with another man. It just felt like an extension of the work, filled with strength and stubbornness, a jostling for control and power. He liked debating who would top and grudgingly giving in to a man that would chuckle and know he wasn't as grudging as he seemed. He liked being tired and in the middle of no where with another man's hands on his skin, another man whispering in his ear, another man filling his body.

There was no chance of that tonight. Liam dunked his head under the hot water and shivered as it slipped across his skin. It soaked his hair and made the pale length stick to his body. It was a visceral pleasure and the only one he'd likely find tonight, given his present situation. It didn't help that Deseem was so willing, that it would take very little to convince his husband to do more than sleep tonight in the same bed. He ran a hand over his own chest, his own stomach and it wasn't a past Guardsman he saw in his mind now but a slender young man with golden eyes and black hair.

No one could blame him for his thoughts. He had only ever had the best intentions toward Deseem, even before he knew just for certain all he owed the other man. It hadn't been his idea to consummate their marriage and when given no choice he'd been as careful and gentle as he could. It wasn't his fault that he was still a young man, one that happened to crave physical contact and one that was at least partially kree. He was allowed his thoughts and the small comforts of his own hand and who it was his mind conjured was no one else's concern. He closed his eyes, braced one hand on the wall of the shower and let the other stray lower.

Deseem woke from his nap at the sound of a door shutting softly. He yawned and stretched full out on the bed and kicked a little at the entangling dress. It was becoming an irritant but the thought of dressing like a man again still made him feel a little sick. The idea was there, however, which was the first time in months, longer really that he considered it. Whatever the Soulhealer was doing to him was showing some small progress. Liam was right, it didn't hurt, just made him feel fuzzy and groggy and he'd come back to himself with hours passed in what felt like minutes. She shoo him away to nap which he always agreed to and slept peacefully with.

He couldn't read yet, it still made him sick but he was feeling different. It wasn't one thing he could define, he was feeling more himself. Less desperate, less broken, less wounded but not in any way he could explain. He still felt paralyzed with panic and fear for moments but the triggers of those attacks were less common. He no longer felt sick with fear when Liam frowned or if something was out of place. Even speaking to others was getting slowly easier even if he had limited means of conversing with most people.

None of it was major things but little things were smoothing out. He found he could think again, not just sit and stare blankly off into space but actually think. He felt more connected and was surprised he felt something other than fear. It wasn't happiness but a sense of calm that he'd forgotten he could feel. More, even though part of him still screamed in disagreement, he felt safe in his husband's home, in the rooms they shared and that had been a feeling he hadn't felt for years.

How much of the subtle changes was directly linked to whatever the Soulhealer was doing he didn't know. Most of it, he imagined, could be her doing but he wasn't going to surrender all of it to her. Some of it was his own making. His own efforts to keep his promises to his husband and tell him more, share more with him, was helping him a great deal. It had been so long since anyone had cared to know if he was well, he'd forgotten how that concern felt.

He was honest enough to place most of the changes he was feeling square to his husband. Liam may not be doing the actual Soulhealing but it was on his request that the Healing be offered. He could have refused. He may not have been able to convince Deseem in words that he was safe but he'd seen the lingering fears and taken him to meet the Guardians. That meeting had proved without words that he was not going to be harmed. He may not understand the sheer amount of effort it took Deseem to speak of his thoughts and feelings but his husband had cared enough to want to know. More than just setting so much in motion, he was a kind man, careful, gentle and he was blessed to have been given to him.

He was even starting to believe all the things his husband was saying. He was starting to believe he meant it when he said Deseem didn't have to dress as a wife and woman. He'd even smiled when Deseem hadn't wrapped the braids of his hair up in the veil this morning. It frightened him to even halfway believe, because belief meant hope and hope crushed was more painful than a beating.

Deseem swung his legs from the bed and stretched his spine out, yawning again. The bathroom door was closed so he assumed that was what woke him. Which meant Liam was home and he found himself smiling a little at that thought. He'd never have imagined that he'd feel better knowing his husband was home but he did. Just to be sure he stood and left his feet bare as he shuffled to the front room.

Sure enough, Jas, the Soulhealer was gone but Baxter was stretched out on his bed. The dog barely raised his eyes to look at him and was half asleep himself. The heavy tail thumped a happy greeting even if the dog was too lazy to get up. It made his smile widen, he was overly fond of the animal. Just sitting, petting the velvety smooth coat made him feel better, more calm, more peaceful but he didn't stop to pet Baxter now.

He needed to see if his husband required anything first. The changes he was feeling happening inside his head were loosening up a lot of things for him. He no longer felt constricted and smothered with what he had to do to be an acceptable wife but he still understood and felt compelled to keep to his place. One thing he must do was see to it his husband had what he required when he returned home and now while he didn't feel sick if he didn't scurry to check, he felt a nagging need instead.

The bathing room door was still shut but he heard the water running on the other side. Liam had told him many times over he was welcome to come in while he was showering or bathing. If Liam wished something, like a clean uniform or casual clothes pulled, his boots cleaned, tea made, he could have it ready for him when he was finished. Not that Liam ever accepted his request to serve him but Deseem felt compelled to ask.

Deseem opened the bathing room door and stepped inside quickly, shutting it behind him as he'd been told to do. It kept the steam and warmth in. "Husband, I..." He started to ask but the words died when he glanced up.

He'd seen his husband undressed several times since their wedding night and he blushed and tried not to look each time. Liam never seemed to notice but Deseem doubted he would welcome being stared at. It wasn't the lack of clothes or the way the wet, white hair clung to his skin that shocked the words from his mind.

His husband was aroused. Something he'd not even really seen even on their wedding night. His manhood stood out, proud, red and swollen with desire. The blue eyes were closed. One hand and arm braced his body against the wall, the other, well the other moved along that length in slow strokes that made Deseem feel faint to see. It wasn't even the sight that stopped his words but the answering thrill of pleasure the sight shivered across his own body that made him forget how to speak.

Liam's head jerked up and his hand pulled away from his length as if he wasn't just caught masturbating in the shower. "Deseem!" He nearly choked on the name, startled as much at being caught as by the man from his imagination arriving in the bathing room. He scrambled to snatch at a wash cloth but the effort to hide his arousal only seemed to make his state more obvious.

"I just...I..." Deseem wasn't sure he could breathe. His skin tingled and the steam from the shower made him feel feverish.

"What is it, Deseem?" Liam knew he was blushing bright red and he told himself not to snap at the boy but he just wanted the other man to turn around and go. He needed those amber eyes somewhere else.

"I..." He'd forgotten just why he'd come looking for Liam. His lips felt dry and he licked them a little to moisten them. "Husband..." He felt his feet moving closer to where the shower waters still rained down. "You...please let me..." He didn't know how to ask but he wanted to be under the hot water too. He wanted those strong hands on his own body, wanted to be touched so badly it hurt his heart to deny the need. He wanted to please his husband, as his husband had pleased him, and didn't know how.

Liam groaned a little as Deseem stepped closer. The weave of the washcloth was a teasing contact and he found himself pressing it to his groin in a way that had nothing to do with modesty. Deseem looked hungry, looked like he wanted to be pulled under the water, the absurd dress he wore would soak and grow heavy. They'd have to remove it, unwind the braids he wore, pin him to the tile wall, kiss him, touch him all under the hot water.

"Husband...let me be your wife." Deseem heard himself whispering. His own manhood pulsed with the beat of his heart, aroused, wanting and very unwomanly under his dress.

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Chapter Thirty Eight

The shower water may as well have gone ice cold, Deseem's words shocked Liam back to reality. This wasn't someone he could do as he willed with. Deseem didn't approach him from want but from duty. He'd never taken an unwilling partner to his bed, expecting their wedding night, and he wasn't going to now. It was just a cruel joke that Deseem would walk in while Liam was lost in fantasy about him. It had blurred his thinking for a moment.

Liam drew a breath. "You're not my wife, Deseem, you don't need to..." he was going to say Deseem didn't need to whore himself but Liam couldn't quite say that. He closed his eyes. "Just because we're wed doesn't mean you must submit to the marriage bed. Please, just...I need a moment alone." He wasn't sure he could finish now but he needed a moment anyway to settle himself down.

Deseem frowned. He was embarrassed now and not sure why and still with a fever in his body and Liam wanted him to go away. He'd understood that his husband hadn't wanted the comforts a wife could offer, he'd been told so many times in those first weeks and Deseem knew he should have been happy for it. Only he wasn't, not really and he hadn't known how much he wasn't happy for it until he'd walked into the bathing room just now.

He turned to go, hard and flushed and feeling stupid and awkward and rejected. He wanted to touch himself if Liam wasn't going to touch him but he'd never done that before and wasn't sure how. More so, he would need permission from his husband to even attempt to relieve the ache he was feeling. Deseem wasn't even sure keeping the itchy, needy feeling to himself was right or if it violated his promise to let his husband know when something upset him.

Deseem stopped half way to the door. "Husband?" He asked, his back still toward Liam but he heard the frustrated sigh.

"Yes, Deseem?"

"Please, I..." He balled his hands up into fists. "Not...not as your wife...please, I haven't...I can't without your..." He sighed angrily at his own difficulties and half turned to look at his husband. "I want to be... I don't know how...show me...please."

That wasn't what he expected to hear. "Deseem..." Any arousal he'd lost to embarrassment returned with a vengeance. "We can't..." He caught himself speaking in Trade and wasn't sure he could think clearly enough in Bastion to say what he had to say.

Deseem heard the denial in the words he didn't understand. "I'm sorry, I know I am not...I know I am not desirable." He could think and wait and he knew the aching hungry feeling would go away. But his tutors had been right, once he knew what it felt like to find release and allow that primal urge into his life it was much more difficult to deny. They just hadn't told him he'd learn what it felt at another man's hands and be left as naïve as before but with less will to fight it.

"No." Liam backed up and put his spine to the cool tile wall. "No, Deseem no, that's not the problem. Just the opposite, I do desire you and I want to drag you close to me right now, I'm trying to do what's right for you..." The scratchy texture of the washcloth was a small comfort on his length and he didn't even really notice he was slowly, softly, rubbing the cloth against himself.

"My husband knows what is right for me." Deseem answered automatically but it felt like someone had hit him in the chest.

The other man's voice was so small, so lonely, that Liam crumbled. Would easing some of both of their loneliness be such a bad thing? He didn't have to have sex with Deseem but some touch, some kiss, in a friendly way could do little harm.

Liam closed his eyes. "Deseem, if you're asking because you feel you must, please go. If you're asking for yourself..." Could he actually invite the other man closer? Could he stop himself from it? "You're welcome to join me. Choice is yours, and yours alone." He let the words fall out before he could stop them and half prayed Deseem would leave and half prayed he'd stay.

The room was silent but for the water still running for a long moment. "The choice is mine, husband?"

"Yes."

"May I undress, my husband?" He wanted to feel his skin naked along the other man's again.

Liam stopped the washcloth's slow rubbing. "If it pleases you." He heard himself whispering, using one of Deseem's normal statements against him.

"It does, my husband." He began to work at the ties and hooks on the dress, eager to be free of the cloth and the linen underdress. Liam didn't move from where he stood against the shower wall, his eyes still shut but Deseem didn't care. He'd been invited, he was going to be touched.

The dress fell to the floor and he pulled at the ties in his hair. "What should I do now, husband?" He was blushing, embarrassed to be partially aroused but unwilling to hide that state from his husband's eyes. Should Liam wish to look, which he hadn't yet.

"Water will go cold...here." Liam opened his eyes. "Oh Lady bless me...." Deseem had put on some weight since they were wed and no longer looked fragile and sick but he was still not as filled in as he should be. He was still far too much flawless dusky skin and tumbles of black hair with golden eyes like beacons shining from his too serious face. Except unlike their wedding night when arousal had to be coaxed to Deseem's flesh, he was already partially there and it made Liam forget what he planned to do.

"Husband?" Deseem stood and let the blue eyes study him but he couldn't tell what Liam was thinking.

"I'm sorry, Deseem, you are quite desirable to look upon." He soothed his guilty conscious by saying Deseem had asked him and he could use this as a means of speaking about the subject. He tried to tell himself it had nothing to do with how badly he wanted the other man.

There was real warmth in his husband's voice and Deseem smiled. He may have asked to stay for selfish reasons but a side result was that he'd managed to please his husband which was something he found not entirely easy to accomplish.

Liam about melted under that shy smile and turned to fumble with the spigots for the water as a means of distraction. The shower cranked off and slowed to a drip but Liam wanted the room hot and steamy. It took only a thread of power and a little bit of focus but he gathered all the moisture in the room and heated it to billowing clouds of steam. It had taken him years of painful effort to learn his own form of magic, with no other Elementals to teach him but once he'd understood he was different and it was okay to do things differently and learned his way, things were frightfully easy.

"Oh!" Deseem whispered, surprised but the sudden appearance of the hot steam but it was soothing. More so, it offered a hazy obscurity and a deeper sense of privacy in their already private bathroom.

"Deseem?"

"Husband?" He saw a form move in the steam and then a hand stroked down the outside of his bare arm to lace around his own fingers. The touch made his body shiver as wispy warmth

swirled around him. Another hand found his face and traced his features with tender care.

"Tell me you don't want this and we stop, you don't have to want this, Deseem. You don't, if you wish to be touched we can make arrangements..."

"I wish my husband's touch." He whispered and it was the truth. He was safe with Liam, the man wouldn't hurt him and he already knew could touch him in such a wonderful way.

Liam's body shivered at the whispered words and found he wanted it to be true. "Deseem have you touched yourself at all since...since we were wed?"

"No my husband, I wouldn't, even if I knew how....not without your permission..."

"I didn't ask you for permission." Liam let his fingers trace Deseem's mouth.

"You are my husband."

"And you are mine, neither of us owns the other, Deseem. You've still never pleased yourself?"

Deseem felt himself tilting his head to follow the gentle touch that explored his features. "No..."

"I can't..." He had to pause to think clear enough. "I can't show you, you just have to do it, learn what you like and don't like... I want to kiss you."

Deseem's knees trembled and his length hardened at the desperate request. "I liked being kissed."

Maybe it was wrong and he shouldn't but for all his training and ideals and honor, Liam was still a man. Deseem was beautiful and appealing and above all naked. Liam couldn't easily refuse that, especially when Deseem seemed so willing. They're lips brushed together, softly, carefully and Liam sighed.

He had forgotten how softly the boy could kiss and how much he'd liked that. It was barely there brushing of lips against lips and Deseem made no effort to deepen the contact. Anyone else would have pushed the kiss deeper, pulled their bodies closer, but Deseem simply accepted what ever was offered without demands for anything more. It was intoxicating, seductive and Liam found himself lost in the soft kisses. He wished they were back in the forest, on their blanket in the sunshine, kissing gently like this for hours.

When he pushed the kiss a little deeper, Deseem didn't even pause before parting his lips and accepting it. It bothered Liam that Deseem's only experience was that one single night and that he had responded then out of a desire to obey but it felt so good to have that shy mouth part for him with hungry welcome. He let his hands slip up to the back of the other man's head. Back to be buried deep in the heavy dark hair growing damp in the thick steam.

An odd thought occurred to Liam and he broke the kiss. "Deseem..."

"Hmmm?" The boy sighed but his face stayed tilted up and his lips were still parted.

"You've never kissed anyone."

Golden eyes cracked open. "Husband?"

"You've been kissed but you haven't kissed anyone. Kiss me."

"Husband?"

Liam smiled and ran his thumb over the crinkled line of confusion on Deseem's brow. "Kiss me."

"I don't know how."

That made him chuckle warmly. "Try." Deseem was so hesitant about even touching him and Liam wanted to be touched. He watched the golden eyes look confused and then curious and then brighten a little as the idea settled in.

Deseem's hands rose up, uncertain and shy and Liam let his own lower down the boy's body to rest around his waist. The hands were uncertain but didn't tremble in fear. They touched Liam's face with hesitation but quickly smoothed over his features. The seriousness on Deseem's face made him smile and the smile drew the other man's fingertips to his lips.

"You don't smile often." Deseem heard himself whisper and felt the smile disappear from under his touch. He pulled his hands away and dropped his eyes. "I'm sorry, my husband."

Liam moved quickly to catch the slender wrists. "No, you're right, I don't smile often but neither do you."

He'd expected anger or a rebuke at his bold statement but the teasing quirked a tiny small grin to his own lips. "Until recently there was nothing to smile about."

The earnestness was more than Liam could handle at the moment. "Shouldn't you be kissing me?" He asked softly and pressed the boy's hands back to his face, liking how the slender fingers curled around his jaw line. The fingers paused but slipped back across Liam's neck to tangle in his own hair and tug him down slightly.

He let himself be pulled downward but kept his eyes open as Deseem carefully pressed his lips to Liam's own. The kiss was quick, dry and clumsy. Deseem broke it and pulled away a little, eyes wide and worried and Liam knew he was waiting to be yelled at. So instead he smiled softly and leaned forward, asking silently for another kiss.

This one wasn't as shy or worried but still was awkward. Liam tried very hard not to influence the kiss at all, to let Deseem learn and explore as he willed. It wasn't easy and he found his hands stroking the skin of the boy's waist, his hip, wanting to pull them closer. He wanted to deepen the kiss, pull their bodies together, wanted to touch and rub and push them both to trembling release. Instead he let Deseem shyly kiss him for as long as the shorter man wished.

"Oh...." Deseem sighed as he broke a slightly deeper kiss. "Husband...I..."

"Hmm? What? Tell me..." Liam sighed and found himself nuzzling Deseem's neck, kissing behind his ear, nibbling softly.

"It's not...oh...not enough....I..."

"No." Liam sighed. "Kissing isn't enough." He focused and made sure the steam was still thick and heavy and wondered if the water in the shower would be fully hot again. Only one way to find out. He slipped his hand into one of Deseem's and tugged the boy deeper into the room.

Deseem followed docilely but not from fear or because he felt he had no choice. He followed because he knew he'd be safe and he wanted to be wherever his husband was taking him. Not that the small bathroom had many places they could go to and he wasn't at all surprised to be led back to the corner with the shower in it.

It had only been a short while since he'd come to almost the very same spot. He was alone that time and desperate. He'd sat down and opened his wrist praying to never again wake up and endure another day. Liam's anger that night had terrified him but he'd been grateful to learn his

husband wished him gone. No amount of wild imaginings, even before Deseem had been made a bride, could have created a scene where he was willingly going to his husband's touch almost on the same spot.

Liam felt the slight pause and he glanced up the hand and arm he was holding expecting Deseem to have changed his mind. His husband's eyes were lowered but the look on his face was more of quizzical thought than regret or fear. "What is it?"

Dark, damp waved hair bounced as Deseem shook his head. "Nothing, my husband."

"Deseem?"

Golden eyes darted up and he reminded himself he was supposed to be honest. "It was here...I was just thinking of how much can change in a few weeks."

"You nearly died, I'd never have forgiven myself if you'd have died."

"I did die here." He heard himself whisper. "The bride died here and it was you that saved me. You that let the...the husband awake the next day." Deseem was trembling at the thought and even more frightened to say it. He would have been beaten for speaking of his married self as a male, even his brother would have beaten him but all Liam did was smile again one of his shy rare smiles.

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Chapter Thirty Nine

"Here." Liam reached over and got the water turned back on. "Let me wash your hair."

"Husband?"

"I was nearly finished..." In more than one way. "Let me..." Deseem didn't protest again and let Liam move him under the hot water so it soaked the thick hair.

People had washed his hair for him his entire life. He was used to it and actually had grown to prefer bathing himself and the privacy it offered. Neither experience was as nice as Liam fussing with the heavy length. The man's hands were strong but moved with such gentle care not to pull or tug as he made it all wet and began soaping the mass up. Soon those hands were massaging his scalp and down to his neck and lower to his shoulders. It felt quite good and he let the hands draw him back a half step until he was leaning against Liam's chest.

Deseem never really noticed in normal day to day life how much taller Liam actually was. Liam was tall, he'd noticed his husband stood quite a bit taller than even other Watchers and he was a

full head taller than Deseem. He liked that difference, liked leaning his head back against the strong chest and how the arms enfolded him.

He heard himself sighing in contentment as the soap slick hands gently slipped over his chest, teasing and not lingering. It was enough of a touch to make his skin tingle and remind him of how good their wedding night had been but not enough to really satisfy.

"I can't show you...here..." Liam's slippery hand glided over the boy's stomach and found his hand again. Only this time he didn't curl his fingers around it but placed it flat against the boy's own skin. "You have to learn what you like..." He put his own hand flat over Deseem's and guided the hesitant touch up across the slender ribs. "Some men like having their nipples touched..." He guided the hand trapped below his own over to swirl across the hard sensitive nub. "Some don't."

"Oh!" Deseem's breath caught in his throat surprised that his own touch could give him so much physical pleasure.

The small gasping sigh shot across Liam with far more impact than he'd expected. He licked his lips and remembered himself and what they were supposed to be doing. He guided Deseem's hand away and down lower. Just before he guided the slender hand that final bit lower, Liam was smart enough to move a little to the side. He didn't want Deseem rubbing back against him, his own length trapped against the boy's back being teased with contact he couldn't properly have. It still let Deseem lean back against his side but kept things at a safe distance.

"Close your eyes....think about something, someone you wished was with you..." He guided the boy's hand down lower. The fingers were stiff and hesitant but with careful prompting curled around his own length. Liam wrapped his own hand around Deseem's and moved them both.

He glanced to the side and smiled. Deseem's eyes were shut and he had bitten his lip between his teeth. He was trying to be quiet but small, tiny mewling sounds were slipping from his throat. His free hand had come up and was pressed to his stomach, wanting to explore and touch his own body as well but still unsure.

"Some men like to touch themselves harder...some softer... some like to touch lower, some don't..." He whispered into Deseem's ear. "You have to learn your own body..." He lightened his grip over Deseem's hand but the boy's fingers didn't follow. "That's it..." He whispered as Deseem hesitantly stroked his own flesh of his own will.

Deseem whimpered a little, shy with any sounds even, and his body writhed. Liam held him close, petted his hair, whispered soft words of encouragement. It was a vastly different experience from his first time touching himself. Barely thirteen, hard as a rock from accidentally catching the glimpse of one of the younger servants as she scrubbed the floor and embarrassed beyond words at that glimpse. Her top had slipped from a shoulder exposing nothing really but the roundness of one breast that bounced and jiggled with each pass of the scrub brush but his body had shivered in lust.

He'd been too shy to tell anyone, too embarrassed to mention it and too well read to not understand. That quick, stolen glance had sent him almost running back to his rooms, scared silly someone would notice the state he was in. He'd locked his door and had his hands down his pants almost at the same time. It hadn't taken much and he hadn't really enjoyed it but it solved the problem and gave him control back over his body even if it had left him feeling vaguely ashamed at what he'd just done.

Yet here was Deseem, being encouraged, comforted, held. Liam was petting his hair and whispering softly to his quiet moans about how it was okay and it was supposed to feel good and to think about anything he wanted. He was trying to turn what too often was a lonely act into something that would be a good substitution for more one on one contact but it didn't stop him

from being a little envious. Then again, Liam had many years of contented self satisfaction instead of the lonely, painful, frustration of denial Deseem had been surviving.

It didn't take much, Liam hadn't expected it to. With a long, sighing exhaled breath Deseem's body trembled and came. Liam held him as close as he could. "That's it...it's okay..." He whispered softly, barely louder than the sound of the running shower water. His hands ached to help Deseem, his mouth wanted to do more than press a soft kiss to the side of the other man's neck but he stayed still and let Deseem be as alone as he could be.

"I...I'm sorry...I..." Deseem panted softly as his breath slowly returned.

"Shhh..." Liam whispered and found he couldn't let the boy go. He needed to hold onto the slender body while he touched himself as much as Deseem had seemed to need being held.

Deseem knew now what those quick motions meant and he felt a little guilty. He should be pleasuring his husband. He should be the one touching his husband's flesh. If he wasn't feeling so good, so wonderful eased and trembling with the after effects of pleasure he might have felt more guilty. As it was, he turned a little in Liam's arm and it seemed to make their bodies fit together just a little better.

He liked it. Like the way Liam held him close with the one arm around his waist and how his husband buried his face against the side of his head. Turned to the side a little he was able to watch now and in the steam and water felt no shame in looking. His husband touched his own body with far more confidence and skill than Deseem had but the goal was the same and Deseem knew the burning touch of want Liam was feeling. It had felt better when Liam had touched him, soothing light touches across his hair and skin, whispered comforting words that had filled his thoughts. He's said it was okay to think about anything and Deseem had taken that as permission to think about his husband's hands touching more of him. It was when he'd thought about Liam doing more than touching him that his body had shivered and stumbled blindly over the edge into release.

It had been that touch and the soothing words and the sharpness of his thoughts that had swept his feet away. It seemed only fair to offer the same in return. He knew he wasn't bold enough to actually whisper soft words as Liam had done for him, he could barely speak a sentence still without being frightened, but he didn't need words. Liam had given him permission before to touch him but Deseem had always been too timid, too scared, to try. He'd wanted to and often thought about it. Sometimes when he woke in the middle of the night he'd even be bold enough to sooth a light touch over a stray lock of long white hair.

Stealing a touch of Liam's hair while the man slept was a vastly different effort than openly touching his naked skin while his husband was pleasuring himself and Deseem knew it. Carefully he reached up, his heart still pounding from his own release, drunk still and too bold on the whole experience, and let his fingertips brush along Liam's side. It was a small touch and some part of him waited to be scolded, to be beaten for stealing it.

Liam didn't yell at him or scold him but the touch didn't go unnoticed. The moan was deep and low in the taller man's throat and it carried a needy hunger the others hadn't. Blue eyes opened and caught Deseem in a look that still his hand from touching further across the strong flesh.

"May I?" Deseem asked as those eyes continued to stare at him.

Liam's mouth fell open and his eyes grew wider as he struggled to find words. When he did manage to speak the words came out as breathy, pleading moans. "Please....please...."

The soft begging almost felt better than his own release and it turned Deseem's word upside down. There was no time to think about it now, his mind was focused on every breath Liam took, the motion of his husband's hand and the feel of the arm still around his body. He grew bold and

pressed his hand flat against Liam's chest, slipped his fingers across bare skin.

The fine white hairs on Liam's chest were sparse but Deseem liked the way they felt under his fingers. He liked the feel of the strength in the muscles below the softer skin, even liked the rough feel of faded scars his fingers occasionally found. Then his fingers were right next to one peaked, hard, pink nipple and he paused. When Liam had touched him there it had felt insanely good but also intimate, private, and he wasn't entirely sure his permission to touch extended so far. His want to touch and memory of pleasure overrode his concern and very carefully Deseem let one fingertip circle the sensitive flesh.

"OH! Oh Lady protect!" Liam moaned, surprised in a very good way. It was the surprise as much as the pleasure that caught him off balance. He pulled Deseem from beside him to in front of him, the hand at the boy's waist slipping up to steady his face. Before he knew what he was doing he was kissing Deseem again, deeply, desperately. He was thrilled with how willingly Deseem accepted the kiss and even kissed him back a little as he let go and came, hard, with Deseem's hands resting comfortably along his back.

He had been expecting some form of reaction to touching such a private place but he hadn't really been ready for it to be a positive one. Liam's moan made him happy, it tingled around the good feeling of his own climax and made the whole thing sweeter. He hadn't expected the strong arm wrapped around him to pull him closer, to pull him from Liam's side to in front of him. Neither had he expected that arm to slip away only to have that free hand return to cradle his face as his husband claimed a searing kiss. Deseem felt his own hands settle against the strong back as if it was the most natural thing in the world to do and he parted his mouth for the kiss and even tried to kiss in return.

Liam shuddered and Deseem understood now. Something far hotter than the cooling shower water splashed against his stomach as Liam broke the kiss to moan, low and soft as he came. It should have felt odd or wrong but it didn't. It just felt right. It all felt right, the soft kisses Liam pressed to his lips between softer moans, the feel of his hands on his husband's bare skin, the feel of hands on his own and the hot splash of release against his own skin, it all felt perfect.

"Oh, Deseem..." Liam sighed. "Oh...my..." They were definitely going to need to talk about this. After they finished washing off and after Liam was done softly kissing the now very willing lips of his husband. "Oh Deseem..."

The slender young man's stomach picked that moment to growl. Deseem blushed bright red. "I'm sorry, my husband."

The surprised look on the other man's face made Liam laugh. "Don't be." He ran the back of his knuckles across the embarrassed face. "Let's get dried off and get you some dinner. Jan is still worried about your weight."

It seemed like a good idea, the water was going from chilly to cold but Deseem paused. "My father..."

Liam almost missed the barely whispered words. "What?"

"My father, when he was angry, he'd leave orders I wasn't to be fed. Sometimes days..."

The confession froze Liam where he stood. Wasn't to be fed, Deseem spoke about the situation like he was some exotic pet not a human being and worse spoke of care that would have been wrong for an animal with casual acceptance. It made him feel sick and coldly, deeply angry. He had enough reasons to hate King Restonarinach for a lifetime but now he found that hate flaring again over a new injustice.

Carefully, Liam cradled Deseem's face, his thumbs stroked over the boy's cheekbones. "While I

breathe, you'll never starve or hurt again. I promise."

Deseem's lips trembled but it wasn't from emotion. Liam didn't have to look too closely to see the goose bumps on the darker skin, but he was surprised Deseem's lips had turned a little blue as he began to shiver hard. He reached a hand out and really let himself feel the water.

"Oh that's gone ice cold." He let go of Deseem and got the water turned off but the boy stood where he'd been left, a wet, shivering mess. He moved to gather up towels. "I don't feel it. Not really. One of the advantages of being an Elemental, once I understood how my magic works it's like breathing. If I get cold, it just warms the air closest to my skin without me having to think about it. Here..." He reached out with his magic. The play of water and air and fire in the room was pleasing. It was a simple thought to balance heat and air and moisture into the perfect levels to pull the cold water from Deseem's skin and wrap him in hot, drying air.

"Oh." Deseem stopped shivering as his skin dried and warmth wrapped around him. "I didn't know you can do that..."

Liam wrapped a towel around his waist before getting one about Deseem. "It's not difficult, well, not now. Trying to work like someone with one or two magical talents gave me headaches. Being an Elemental is its own talent, it seems. Once I figured that out, everything just kind of fell into place." He looped another towel around Deseem's shoulders and his still damp hair. One of the strands got caught on his fingers and he let it slip across his touch. "Would you let this loose tonight? I'll help you braid it before bed."

"If it would please my husband." Deseem said meekly but he dared to glance up and he liked the warmth in the cold blue eyes. "Would my husband leave his hair free as well?"

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Chapter Forty

"Would you like that?" The request surprised Liam, Deseem never asked anything of him.

Deseem simply nodded.

"Than loose it shall be. It's too long, I should cut it now that I'm not on the coast." The same quick magical drying that had left Deseem's hair damp had almost fully dried his own. Liam moved to open the door to the bedroom and the last of the steam disappeared in the rush of the colder outside air. "Have you ever seen the ocean?" He found himself asking as he moved to pull out clean clothes for both of them. Instead of a uniform, Liam dug out the comfortable, casual soft black sleeping outfit like had been left for him on their wedding night. Beside it he found the green outfit that had been left for Deseem and he pulled that out as well.

"No, my husband, I haven't." Deseem followed and had to stop toweling at his hair when Liam pressed the small stack of fabric at him. "Husband?"

"We're not going anywhere, no one is coming in, why not be comfortable? I'm not even putting a uniform back on."

It felt wrong but it was a simple enough thing to do and really his husband had requested it. If Liam had wanted him to wear nothing while they were alone in their rooms he would wear nothing. He shouldn't feel guilty about wearing the comfortable, soft clothing being offered him. It was easy to sooth that guilt with the knowledge that it was a direct request from his husband but he still sighed a little at the sheer physical pleasure of the soft, easy to wear clothing as he put them on.

He glanced up to watch Liam standing, running a comb through his hair. The white strands fell easily into place to shower down his back over the dark fabric. He'd noticed that his husband rarely sat for such casual tasks, he even stood to pull on his socks and boots more days than not, balancing on one foot than the other. It made him wonder if it was a trait of Corena or just a quirk of one man.

Liam glanced over and caught Deseem watching him. The golden eyes were haunting and he still wasn't entirely used to them. "You'd like the ocean, the way you like to sit and watch the wind blowing in the trees. The ocean is like that but larger. Rolling waves that flip up white foam and break on the sand and rocks, over and over again."

"It's large?" He stopped staring and sat down at the vanity to work the knots from his own hair. If he let it dry unbraided he wondered how straight it would become, it was already curling a little so he doubted he'd end up with a smooth shower of black like Liam's white.

"Unbelievably large. One of the Fisher ships took me out, beyond sight of land..." It had been like coming home, just water so deep he could barely sense the land below and wind whipping around him. "Bastion's pretty arid? Not much in the way of lakes even from what I saw of the border."

"And less so further south." Deseem nodded. "It's difficult for me to imagine so much water."

"Or the Verdain, I've never been there, not yet, but it's difficult to imagine virtually no dry land." It was almost as difficult to imagine Deseem's up bringing, having been kept in groomed gardens and isolated rooms his entire life. Would the wilds of the Northern forests or the vastness of the ocean thrill him or frighten him? "Maybe when you're feeling better we could go see the ocean together." He said on a whim. Amber eyes darted up and quickly away. "If you'd like."

"I..." The idea frightened him but didn't make him feel sick with panic but it also thrilled him and made him long to see so much water. "I would be pleased to follow where you go." He didn't miss the way his guarded, careful and very proper answer caused some of the cold distance his husband normally had to creep back. "I think..." He studied the ornate ring on his hand. "I think I would like to see it."

The honesty again caught Liam off guard. "How about we start with getting you dinner and go from there?" They needed to discuss what had just happened but Liam was reluctant to even try to broach the subject on an empty stomach. Frankly it wasn't a conversation he really wanted to have and was happy to stall until they were eating.

Only, seeing Deseem sitting so properly at their table, his hair loose about his shoulders, dressed in the casual pants and soft shirt, made him want to stall further. The boy didn't look frightened or scared, he just looked peaceful. The dark hair tumbled in black curling waves as it dried and made him seem younger and older at the same time.

"Deseem..." Liam tried but golden eyes glanced up and a spoon full of stew paused. The boy had eaten most of his first bowl in quick bites with barely held in sighs of pleasure. His desire to push an uncomfortable subject died. "Here, have more." He spooned out more from the serving tureen.

"Thank you, my husband." Deseem whispered and blushed a little at how much of a pig he was making of himself. "It's quite good."

"It's one of my favorites, here, the flatbread goes well with it." He offered the basket and even though he was invited Deseem took the bread with care.

"Thank you."

The real, earnest gratefulness in the younger man's voice had always grated on Liam's nervous. It seemed wrong to be so thankful for such a simple thing and made him feel it was insincere and just part of the modest, submissive wife act he'd been trying to copy. Now, knowing that his father had actually, physically, starved him made the words carry so much more meaning. He wasn't going to spoil dinner with a serious conversation.

The meal was still shared in relative silence. Liam was by nature a more quiet man and was used to the people he was around drawing him out. Now, faced with someone even more introverted than he was, he found himself clueless about how to draw them out. Only difference was that now, the silences didn't feel so painfully uncomfortable and he was pretty sure Deseem wasn't spending every moment waiting to be hurt. Quiet, easy silences were okay and he didn't force conversation.

Which made the idea of bring up such an awkward conversation after such a relaxed dinner all the more uncomfortable. They were having a good evening and Liam was unwilling to disturb that quite yet. The day had been warm for Fall, the sun bright and it was close to setting now. It would get cold fairly quickly but Liam had always liked the gardens in Autumn. A walk would do Deseem some good too, the boy spent far too many hours indoors as it was.

Liam watched the way Deseem fussed at getting their empty dishes safely back on the tray and ordered neatly for the servants to retrieve and he liked seeing the other man in the more comfortable and masculine pants and soft shirt. He liked seeing the wavy dark hair loose and free and didn't want it braided back. There was a solution, he just wasn't sure Deseem would agree to it.

"Here."

Deseem glanced up from where he'd been straightening the main room and saw Liam standing with a cloak in his hand. He quickly dropped his eyes to hide his disappointment, he'd been looking forward to Liam staying for the rest of the evening, maybe having another section of the book read to him.

"Deseem?"

"Husband."

"Come for a walk with me? The night..." Liam glance to the window. "The sunset will be beautiful. We won't have too many more of these mild evenings."

That surprised him and he stopped fussing with his tidying. "I..." Deseem glanced around but his hand touched his loose hair and that small gesture betrayed his real concern.

"Here, the cloak, there's no need to change or even braid your hair. It's likely no one will see us. I don't mind if they do, even without the cloak. I only suggest it for your own comfort and because

it's going to get chilly fast as soon as the sun goes down."

"I shouldn't..." Deseem glanced down to the simple clothing he had on and had been hoping to keep on to sleep in instead of the linen underdress he normally wore.

Liam wasn't sure if he was pushing too hard to fast. "If we wait for you to change, we'll miss some of the sunset. It's okay, I promise you it is. You've seen how my mother dresses and she's the queen. We won't be out long."

Logically, Deseem knew his husband was bothered by him continuing to go veiled and dressed as a wife. He'd been trying to change, trying to adapt and had made a huge step by not being veiled today around another man. Nothing bad had happened from that, if anything Liam had seemed more at ease around him because of it. If a good wife pleased her husband, and the husband was pleased to have his Bentan bride wife appear as male, didn't that make it okay?

Deseem nodded but his hands shook.

"Good!" Liam smiled brightly and moved to drape the cloak over Deseem's shoulders. It was far too long and the hem would drag but Liam never wore the full cloak. He'd traveled with a heavier, warmer one because if he needed a cloak, it was far too cold for a mid-weight cloak like this. "Here now..." He quickly gathered up the masses of dark hair and slipped them into the hood before he raised it but couldn't help but smile when he saw Deseem almost swimming in the too large cloak.

"Husband?" He liked the amusement in the blue eyes but was unsure if he was the source or not, and if that was good or not.

"Nothing, it's just huge on you. We'll have to order you some winter clothes. The gauzy drapes of fabric you've been wearing are pretty but you'll freeze when the snows come."

"Yes, husband." Deseem glanced down and reminded himself it was okay to speak. "I've never seen snow."

"Well you'll see it come winter, I promise that. We always get some snow, even if it's a mild winter. Up north in the mountains they'll get feet of snow but over on the Brigsha border on the eastern side of the mountains, they get cold but little snow. The mountains form an almost horseshoe shape and all the moisture gets dumped on our side... but that's more than you wanted to know." Liam grinned a little at his own stupidity as golden eyes watched with a serious look. He tended to babble about things that no one cared about, it was a habit he'd thought he'd outgrown. "Let's be off? Come on Baxter!" He called to the dog and the large animal skittered full speed from asleep to running to the bedroom door in a heart beat.

The air outside had a pleasant mildness with hints of cooler air and fall dampness floating around the lingering summer warmth. The colors on the leaves of the trees were all golds and yellows now and some had dropped all to carpet the lawn below. Deseem missed most of beauty, he kept his face turned down and his eyes on the pathway around them as he followed several steps behind Liam.

"Deseem when I asked if you cared to go for a walk with me I didn't mean to have you follow behind me. Please, walk with me?" He reached back and touched the boy's elbow trying to encourage him to come forward but he stayed in place.

"It isn't proper."

"In Bastion maybe, here no spouse would walk behind another."

"It's what you wish?"

“Yes.”

Deseem squashed the queasy panic in his stomach and nodded. It took far more effort than the action should have to step those few paces forward. A few weeks ago, he doubted he could have taken those steps even if his husband had beaten him for disobeying but he was able to take them now.

“There, that’s better. There’s an oak grove over here, filled with squirrels gathering up acorns and a great view of the sunset. Up for it?”

“Yes, my husband.”

Liam nodded and got them moving again, this time Baxter darted around them both, walking side by side. He knew it was the cleansing that had made such a small thing so difficult and that made it easier for Liam to accept but it still was frustrating. All that mattered was that Deseem had found the courage to step up and walk beside him, even if he kept his eyes down still and had his shoulders hunched up under the cloak. It was a small step but a step none the less.

The sun had the sky lit up in pinks and oranges by the time they reached the grove and the bench Liam had in mind. As promised squirrels were darting about, their fluffy tails twitching in annoyance as Baxter darted off to chase them. The leaves on the oaks had gone brown and some had fallen. It was a peaceful, quiet out of the way corner of the palace grounds. Out of the corner of Liam’s eye he saw people occasionally walking about for their own evening strolls but as soon as they caught sight of his dark clothes and white hair they made sure to pick routes that avoided them.

That suited him just fine. Deseem had settled demurely beside him on the bench and sat with eyes down and hands folded but was slowly relaxing. Baxter’s whiny yaps at the squirrels was causing his eyes to dart up and each time they lingered longer. If someone had walked by his rank would force them to say something or acknowledge them and that would push Deseem back to being shy and frightened. For once, making people uneasy and being avoided for it had an advantage.

When Deseem finally was eased enough to lift his eyes and keep them up to enjoy both the brilliant colors of the sunset and Baxter’s playfulness, Liam felt a lot of his own tension draining away. Deseem’s constant nervous fear set him on edge, it wasn’t something he thought he could ever stop feeling. When the people around him were uneasy it was a bad sign, it meant a battle was coming or people you cared for were missing or wounded or dead. He couldn’t make his mind understand that Deseem’s nervous fear was from an entirely different sort.

So he eased as Deseem relaxed and found himself soothing as well and slouching back against the bench. He needed to address what had happened in the shower. He’d been stalling since their wedding night. Now Deseem seemed like he might even be able to handle the conversation and with what had just happened something had to be said.

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Snowflakes and Embers

Chapter Forty One

"Husband?" Deseem asked softly, his voice nearly lost in the sounds of the birds in the trees around them chittering as they settled in for the night.

"Hmm?"

"You said to ask later, may I...?"

That had Liam frowning and tried to remember what he'd asked Deseem to wait to ask him about. "Of course..."

Deseem glanced over his shoulder to where Liam was half sprawled against the back of the bench, arms up on the top of the back rest and white hair floating in the light breeze. "Your hair? You said not to ask but to wait."

It took him a moment to remember when he'd mentioned waiting on the questions that always surrounded his hair. His mind stumbled across the memory of their wedding night and the gentle way Deseem had touched the white strands. "You've waited all this time to ask?"

"I...you didn't bring it up, I didn't wish to ask if it wasn't proper. Is it proper?"

"Of course it is, ask what you will of me about anything." It shocked him that Deseem had been quietly waiting and fearful of asking all these weeks and had only now gotten the courage to speak up.

"It's not a normal color? I haven't seen many of your people...my people..." Deseem caught and corrected himself, he was Corena now. "But those I've seen haven't had hair like yours."

"About as common as your eye color I'd guess." He nodded. "Next day off, I'll take you to the palace to the Lineage Hall, there's paintings of the royal families across the generations and of my family as well. You'll see it wasn't always white. Red hair has always been common in our family, since King Rosin's time anyway. Malcome, my oldest brother? His was always more auburn and Shelia my sister she had brown hair, light brown but not red. Lach has auburn now but it was red when we were kids. Mine was bright, embarrassingly bright red, I looked like a pumpkin. Pale skin and the only one of us to have any freckles and hideous, shocking bright orange hair. Not even the more charming darker red that the family tends to get."

"Orange hair?" Deseem's tone questioned the truth of it for him.

"It's rare but not unheard of for us to have red hair but it's more orange than red. Blonde too but there are whole groups of people with blonde hair so it's more common."

Deseem just raised his eyebrows.

"I'll have you introduced to a cousin of mine, she still has bright red hair almost as bright as mine used to be. You'll see."

"But yours is white now."

Liam nodded. "When I was eleven, my father saw a white strand in my hair and teased me about getting old. By the time I was twelve I had white in my hair and my eyelashes were white. Within

a year the color simply faded out and it just all grew in white. Healer's can't explain it except to say it wasn't from any disease or disorder. Since it wasn't hurting me any, seemed foolish to ask them to try to change it or fix it since this is how it was supposed to be. I hated it at first but really it's such a superficial thing."

"I thought maybe..."

"Maybe?"

"An accident or illness?"

"No, just another way I'm different from everyone around me. My wife, Dorena, I met her when I was fourteen." He shook his head at his own youth. "I was a painfully awkward child. I had begged Lach to help me dye my hair before I met her because I knew we had to wed. There was no choice in it and I knew she was older than me. I didn't want her thinking of me as a freak."

"And did he?"

"No, he refused to help me and made sure I was swamped with trainee work so I wouldn't have time to do it myself. So I met her dead tired and with white hair. We talked and I told her how much I disliked the hair and the odd magic and being so different. I went so far as to apologize to her because she was going to have to marry such a freak." He glanced off over to where Baxter was sitting under a tree staring up at the squirrels just out of reach. "She told me I wasn't a freak, that I was unique and I shouldn't be sorry for it. Told me too many people spent too much time trying to be like everyone else while wishing they weren't and here I was, one of a kind, like a snowflake." He caught the uncertain confused look in Deseem's eyes and knew that a boy that never seen snow wouldn't understand. "Legend says no two snowflakes are alike, each one is different and with the hair being white..."

"Oh."

"Don't tell Lach, he'd tease me over it. It was just something Dorena would say when we were together, and Norlan."

Deseem didn't miss the cold, empty pain that took over the blue eyes. Not even the fire of the sunset could warm them. "I'm sorry for the loss of your wife."

"Thank you."

Only his husband's voice sounded as cold now as his eyes looked. Deseem wanted to try to explain how he had come to keeping the woman's belt but he paused. If just mentioning her in passing chilled Liam's heart so, it would be too much to mention it further. Deseem didn't want to cause the man more pain, not when he'd been only kind to him.

They sat in a silence broken only by Baxter's frustrated whines and the final calls of the birds for the night. Slowly the sun began to fade from reds to blues and purples as it sank and the air grew colder. Liam still leaned back but even Deseem could see it was a forced casualness now.

"My sister," Deseem ventured, carefully. "When I was upset, or lonely, she'd say my eyes were like the sparks thrown from a fire up into the night sky."

"You sound like you miss her a great deal."

Deseem nodded. "I used to read to her, the way you do to me."

The sadness the sunset was bringing wasn't what Liam had wanted. "Speaking of which, I owe you a chapter and it's getting cold." He sat forward. "Ready to go in? It'll be full dark before we're

half way back to our rooms.”

“Yes, my husband.” Deseem agreed docilely. He wasn’t going to complain because it was getting cold and he really was looking forward to Liam reading to him again. He was finding the sound of the steady voice carefully forming the words that were obviously not native to him soothing, comforting and those were two words he never expected to apply to his husband.

Liam signaled to Baxter and the dog reluctantly gave up his post at the base of a tree to follow them back the long winding pathways across the gardens to their room. Deseem hadn’t just talked to him, openly talked to him without cowering, he’d shared something as private and personal as Liam had. It gave him renewed hope that they really could build a friendship. It was an idea that had felt forced before, like he was hoping for it simply to make things easier but now he found he really did wish to be friends with Deseem, not just friendly.

Deseem had the cloak pulled tightly about him when they finally made it back to their room, guided only by the light of a waning moon. Liam still wasn’t thinking of the boy as part of his family. He automatically protected Baxter from the chill without thinking but Deseem he didn’t. It wasn’t to be rude, he’d had Baxter longer.

“I’ll make some tea. We’ll have to get you some warmer clothes if you’re this chilled already.” Liam nodded and let Deseem’s amber eyes follow him as he moved to the main room.

Deseem paused and hung the cloak back up where it belonged. He started to straighten the hanging clothes in the wardrobe, mostly formal uniforms and another extra cloak but stopped himself. He was fussing because some small corner of his mind was still frightened silly that he’d dared to dress in pants and have his hair loose, let alone that he’d gone outside that way.

“I don’t need to do this.” He whispered to himself and forced that need to try to make everything perfect away. “It’s okay. Nothing bad is going to happen.” He believed it but still his mind felt bruised and broken. It was a small comfort because he felt like he was healing, just not healed.

The tea was poured by the time Deseem joined Liam in the main room and Liam glanced up but didn’t ask what had taken so long. Deseem simply nodded and moved to take up what he had started to think of as his chair. He still fussed at his sewing, hating it but needing it to make it okay to allow Liam to read to him.

“Deseem.” Liam started as he placed a mug of hot tea near the boy before taking his own chair. “We need to talk.”

The serious tone made him stop trying to thread his needle. “Yes, my husband.”

“Please, don’t, it’s nothing bad.” He hated seeing the way Deseem folded in on himself as if he expected to be hurt. “We’re just talking better now and we need to clear some things up. Okay?”

Deseem dared to glance up and saw no anger in the cool blue eyes. “Okay.”

“Good.” Liam said in an exhaled sigh of a breath but wasn’t sure what to say from there. “You do know that I don’t care that your people say a Bentan bride is a woman, that I see you and think of you as another man, yes?”

Deseem nodded.

“Good. You know that it’s not normal...” which was a very poor choice of words. “No, it’s not common for men to desire other men in a sexual way.” He felt himself blushing and for a change he actually hoped Deseem would keep his eyes down.

The hope was empty. Amber eyes darted up and caught the way Liam’s face was flushed before

they dropped back down. "I know that it is not tolerated, I don't know enough to know what is common."

"Here? It's accepted and tolerated but still not common. It's our belief that a person is born desiring either the opposite gender or the same or occasionally both but that it's how they're made and natural. Does this make sense to you?"

"I believe so." Deseem answered carefully.

"Good." He hated saying that but it helped him keep his thoughts on track. "Good. Okay. I desire women and I desire men. My brother Malcome? Completely desires women only. Lach? He is only attracted to women but he isn't repulsed by the idea of laying with another man. It's not always something that is a yes or no, there are inbetweens and gray areas and that's okay as well."

Liam sat and studied his husband but the down turned face hid too much so he pushed forward. "I need to know what you desire. Just because you were told to be a wife and submit yourself to another man doesn't make it something you are naturally inclined toward. What is it that you desire, I know you've no experience with women but you have some with another man. It's okay to not be...well... no matter what it's okay but we need to talk about this."

"Husband...?"

Liam rubbed his eyes. "Deseem I try to be an honorable man, I do but you are a very attractive young man and I am sexually attracted to other men. I can't have you... well, like tonight in the shower, I'm not strong enough to refuse you. I don't want to refuse you but Deseem I'm trying to be honorable with you."

"I am your wife."

"No! No, don't say that..." He nearly snapped. "No, you're my spouse, my husband and it's okay to be honest. Even if you really were a woman, we'd have this conversation. It isn't fair to toss two people together and expect them to be compatible. I just want to know the truth and we can go from there."

"The truth?" Deseem got the impression that Liam was hoping he'd refuse him.

"Please."

"The truth is, I have only ever known your touch and it's been pleasurable and gentle and kind. I don't believe I desire men, at least I have not wished for other men to touch me but neither have I wished other women to touch me. The only touch I wish for is my husband's." It was the truth but he wasn't sure if Liam would believe it or think it was the proper wife answer. He swallowed the odd lump in his throat. "I do not know much about...about laying with another but I like it when you touch me."

He'd been warned that Deseem was touch starved. "We need to help you know for sure what it is you desire. It's natural you'd think it was me because I haven't hurt you but the world is filled with people of all sorts. I want you to be happy."

"I've never thought about it. Husband I was to be a priest. I was never to be touched by a woman but I have known for years that the priests do something private together. I am not like your eldest brother than I suppose but I can not say I do not desire women because I have never truly thought about it."

"If I arranged for us to...to attend a function that I know you'll find shocking but one that may help you learn more about what you may desire. Would you be willing to go? I'll be with you." He

caught Deseem's uncertain look. "You won't be expected to do anything and I'll be right there."

It seemed important to Liam so he nodded. "If you feel it's best."

"I want you to have the chance to learn about who you are."

Deseem folded his hands and forgot about his sewing.

"And... until then, you don't need my permission to..." Liam drew a breath and prayed he wouldn't keel over of lust or embarrassment. "To pleasure yourself. It's natural and it's okay."

"Yes, my husband."

"You do understand, correct? It's not that there is anything wrong with you. I just, here, we don't assume a marriage has to be a certain way. You aren't expected to...it isn't that way here."

"Husband?"

"Yes."

"May we still...touch?"

It wasn't the question Liam had expected. It stopped his logical ordered thinking and allowed a small, tiny slip of a thought to leak in. What if Deseem really was kree? What if they could be friends with a little more? What if he wasn't kree but still liked to be held? It made his heart hurt.

He told himself to breathe and not jump to conclusions. Deseem had been kept in isolation with few people even to talk to and no one to touch. He would want contact as soon as he understood it was both allowed and safe. "If you'd like." He remembered too well how good it had felt to be touched by someone after so many lonely years. Dorena and Norlan both had often just let him cuddle close and it had helped him tremendously.

"I would like." Deseem glanced up. "Is that wrong?"

Liam shook his head. "Everyone wants to be touched."

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Chapter Forty Two

"Husband?"

"Yes?"

Deseem spun the ring on his finger. "Would it be too much to ask if you could read to me while I fell asleep? I like the sound of your voice."

If he could think of Deseem as a younger brother Liam hoped his heart would stop hurting every time the boy said such things. "Suits me but you know if I get stuck on words I'll wake you up from dozing to have you explain them to me." Liam could read Bastion but often found words he was uncertain of. Too many years had passed since he'd learned to be fully sure of his skills and he liked making Deseem try to focus on a word or two.

"Thank you." He couldn't stand the idea of fussing at sewing that really didn't seem to matter. All he wanted to do was lay next to Liam and feel the warmth of another body near his own.

Going to bed wasn't a simple process. Liam had always been the sort to just flop onto the beds, pull off his boots if he was lucky, and sleep. Deseem had to fuss and straighten, tidy things up and the like before he was even able to go into the bedroom. He'd originally viewed it as a stall tactic to keep from having to lay down beside a stranger but now he saw it for what it was. He was hoping that once more progress was made undoing the damage to the younger man's mind that he'd stop being so fussy. Even if the look of surprised unease that came across Deseem's face when he ran out of things to do was cute, Liam was looking forward to the behavior stopping.

"Ready?"

Deseem nodded and pushed aside the nagging sense that he hadn't done enough. He followed Liam into their bedroom. Being a few paces behind meant he could watch the way Liam's hair moved, so pale and smooth. It was paler than his skin and Deseem knew Liam's skin was quite pale. He liked the way his fingers looked against that skin, against that hair. He'd very much liked touching that hair and skin and the memory of that made him smile softly.

Liam crawled onto their bed with the book and caught the small grin. He wasn't sure of the source but it was a good thing to catch. Deseem was too young to be so serious and if reading to him as he drifted to sleep made him happy, it was a small thing to do to repay such a large debt.

"Settle in, I've got the lights." He said gently and puffed out all but the lamp near the bed with a thought.

The small display of magic didn't even surprise Deseem any more. None of his servants had magic but he'd seen it for most of his life if only occasionally. It was the ease with which his husband used it that had startled him. Now it just made him feel a little proud, he was married to a powerful man. By Bastion standards that was a very good thing and like it or not it made him feel secure.

Deseem didn't braid his hair back and didn't change clothes as he slipped under the covers and felt them magically warm up around him. He sighed and settled in as Liam fluffed pillows for behind his back and turned to catch the light on the pages of the book. It was a collection of spiritual verses, not so much religious but more on the nature of life and faith and hope. He'd always been fond of them even if the thinking wasn't currently accepted by his faith and he'd had to explain he read it as poetry to be allowed access back home.

"What are you grinning about? My reading Bastion isn't that bad is it?"

He sighed and settled into the soft bed and fluffed the pillow under his head so he could glance up at his husband. "I had a good day today." It seemed like such a minor thing but it meant a great deal. He had a good day, he'd expanded his limitations, tried new things, learned new things, had found pleasure and pleased his husband and really felt like he might be okay for the first time in forever. It had been a very good day.

The whispered words were sincere and made Liam smile softly as well. Carefully he brushed a stray length of hair back from Deseem's face. "I had a good day too." He confessed and was warmed when the amber eyes lowered and the smile widened. "Here now, the next section of verses."

"Thank you, my husband." Deseem answered.

It took Liam a second for the words to sink in because they weren't in Bastion but in Trade. Deseem's accent was thick but the words were understandable and it broke his grin into a smile. "You're welcome. You're welcome." He said in both Trade and Bastion and opened the book he held.

He'd wanted to wake up early and his internal sense of time didn't fail him. Liam drifted up from sleep in a slow, groggy way only to float there as much asleep as awake. He'd planned on rising early and leaving word for Deseem to go about his morning without him but suddenly that didn't feel so important. He could linger a little, rest a little more and he wanted to take the time to make sure Deseem ate breakfast. There was no swearing the boy would even with his permission, some part of him still was caught in the tangled webs of being a wife. He could stay in bed and rest longer and he let sleep pull him back down.

He was indecently comfortable. It was how warm he and the blankets were that drifted him up again. The bed was soft and felt good on muscles sore or twisted from the previous day's lessons. His hair was loose still and that had been a stupid idea to sleep with it free. It may be fine but the strands seemed set on trying into knots while he slept. The idea of crawling out of bed to work on the rat's nest it had become wasn't overly appealing, not when slender legs, long ones too with a nice warmth of their own, were tangled within his own legs.

That drifted his thoughts up a little more but didn't seem to cause any alarm. He was asleep, half asleep, on his back which meant he must have been snoring like a hibernating bear. He always snored when he slept on his back, never bothered him any but nearly every lover he'd ever had complained. Norlan had simply physically rolled him over but Dorena would elbow him in the ribs until he moved. For some reason they'd let him sleep and snore in peace and it made him smile because he was going to catch hell for it once they were all awake.

Something tickled at his nose and he slipped his arm down from over his head, across the sleeping body curled against him and brushed at whatever was threatening to make him sneeze. He caught it and lifted it to see, squinting open sleepy eyes and found he'd captured a wavy, black, silken length of hair. His sleep muddled mind didn't understand. Dorena's hair was brown, light brown and even in the dim light wouldn't be mistaken for black silk and Norlan was balding, his hair trimmed short to keep it out of his face. It was a length of Deseem's hair he'd caught. It was Deseem that was curled so tightly to him.

The information his sleepy mind provided woke him up as surely as if someone had upended a bucket of icy water over him. Dorena was dead, he'd lost her, failed her. She wouldn't have even been on the front of it hadn't been for him, he'd killed her as surely as if he'd been the one to whip and torture them. The memory stabbed his heart and made the pain he always carried suddenly feel sharp, new and crippling again. It was like that, he'd be fine for days, months, and something would catch him and it would feel new and fresh all over again. He'd been told that the pain would dull with time but it hadn't, it had only made the spasms where he hurt so much he couldn't breathe further apart.

He'd forgotten. For one, sleep hazed moment, he'd forgotten that he'd lost her. For a few heartbeats he had woken again in their arms, warm and safe and had felt that love again. It made his loneliness so much more brittle now, so much more acute. It felt like a cruel punishment to have been given that moment of forgetting only to have the cold truth return to knock his breath away again.

Somedays, Liam wondered if it might not be better to be mad. He had been, he knew he had been in those early days when he'd been brought home. So sick in body and crazed in mind that he knew most of his family feared he'd never heal enough to recover. He had been angry then, enraged, tormented by the fresh sounds of her screams and the near silent sound of her final breath and consumed by his own hate. They'd cleaned his infected wounds on his body as gently as they'd cleaned the infected wounds on his soul but as the rage and hate had bled away he'd been left alone with the hurt. He liked it better when he'd been blind with anger, raving with it, because he didn't feel the root source of grief and agony.

He could feel the anger there still, the rage at the injustice of it all but it was small and distant. He still would have given anything to be assigned to the border again. Now if he'd been turned loose as a weapon he'd have no nightmares about bringing death to so many. He'd let his humanity slip away and become a creature of destruction to purge Bastion to the very earth and he'd never regret it. When he touched that corner of mad anger he knew how close he could get to becoming a monster straight from the Age of Chaos and it worried him because he didn't fear it. If he could avenge her, he'd become that monster and unleash his hate on anyone inside of Bastion. He knew he meant anyone too, knew that in that rage he'd be mad and sweep destruction down on innocents and guilty alike. Some part of him longed for that, even now with so much healing and distance in years and miles from that time because to be mad, to be free in his rage, would stop the hurt of grief. It wouldn't bring her back. It wouldn't make those sleep hazed moments of forgetfulness real.

In his life now, he couldn't afford hate. The world had continued to spin and the years had carried him away. Time and politics moved and he wasn't the only one to have lost so much. It was only his selfishness that made him feel like his hurt demanded more. She had loved him, truly so and he'd felt loved. That was more than most people could say from a lifetime of trying. It just still hurt so much, frightfully so and time had moved but hadn't cooled the pain.

It was like he was still in shock. As if some part of his mind had never gotten the message that she was gone and not coming back. It was a gut level thing, something deep and hidden that stayed locked away and refused to accept the truth. He'd see something in a market that he'd know she'd love and go to buy it only to be smacked with the reality that he couldn't give it to her. Or he'd hear someone with her laugh and go half sick crazy with the need to find her even if he knew he couldn't, the need was on a purely instinctual level. The worst were the half awake moments, he always felt more vulnerable when those hit him.

This had been the first time he'd woken up with someone and mistaken them for her. The few times the half awake forgetting had struck him he'd always been alone. Generally, sharing a bed with someone only reminded him more sharply that she was gone. It made him want to push Deseem away, roughly so they weren't touching but he knew he couldn't shove the painful reality as easily away. He wanted to blame Deseem, even if it was illogical, for that contented waking when he'd felt safe, warm and loved again only to have it crushed so painfully but he was too honest and knew it wasn't Deseem's fault.

His eyes were open now, studying the ceiling, trying to catch his breath and not let the grief crush him. He squashed the resentment he suddenly felt at having Deseem part of his life. He crushed the need to lash out at anyone so it would be anyone's fault but his own. It took an effort but he got his breathing under control. He folded his guilt and memories back up into a small ball and pushed them back down where they belonged. It was morning and there were things to do.

Liam glanced down to where the dark head was pillowed on his chest. Deseem's face was almost tucked against his neck the boy had curled so closely to him. Black strands of hair spilled everywhere and it wasn't fair that Deseem could have so much more hair and sleep with it free and have no signs of it having tangled. Carefully, Liam stroked a hand over Deseem's sleeping head, hoping to rouse the boy enough to get him to roll over without actually waking him.

It didn't work. All it did was cause the hand tucked between their bodies to clench a fistful of his shirt and the one on his chest slipped across his body to almost hug him close. The boy was clinging to him like a sticky briar and wouldn't be so easy to pry off. It did surprise him to find Deseem literally sleeping on him and more so to find the boy so stubborn to let him go. In all the weeks they hadn't even touched accidentally in their sleep, or, at least he was pretty sure they hadn't. That meant that this was the first time Deseem had slept cuddled with someone, ever, and the thought of that took away Liam's will to move Deseem back to his side of the bed. He sighed and resigned himself to having his whole arm fall asleep and let Deseem continue to rest, for a while, where he lay.

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Chapter Forty Three

Before he was told he was to be Bentan, before the reality of what that meant had sunk in, Deseem had slept well. He'd go to bed as was required and sleep soundly, normally dreamlessly, secure in the knowledge that he was safe. Even after he'd been told he could become a bride, he'd slept fairly well. His lessons had doubled and his days had grown busier and so at night he'd relished the time alone. It wasn't until after his sister had been wed, after his father had taken to personally beating him for every frustration, that the reality of what it meant to be a bride had sunk in. He stopped sleeping soundly. It no longer felt safe to be so unaware and the slightest of sounds was enough to wake him.

Once he'd actually become a bride he was surprised at how well he slept. Liam stayed on his side of the bed and Deseem on his but his husband made him feel secure. Even before his breakdown, before they knew of his cleansing and had begun to heal the damage caused, he'd slept better with Liam than he had for years. Not even the worry that he was failing as a wife and becoming a greater burden and disappointment daily had prevented that.

Now that he was healing and so many truths had come out into the open, Deseem found sleep a comforting thing. He again was sleeping deeply and waking feeling refreshed and rested. His nightmares had all but stopped and even Liam's tossing and turning didn't disturb him. He was tired, exhausted really, and told that his body and mind were still recovering but Deseem didn't care. It just felt so good to sleep again, to feel it was okay to be so blindly vulnerable again, that he was just simply grateful.

So it didn't surprise him, when he drifted awake, that he was rested and felt all snuggled and

tucked under the covers. What did surprise him was hearing a heartbeat in his pillow, slow and steady. That sucked him up from sleep faster than he would have liked. He sighed and snuggled his pillow closer. Only it wasn't a pillow and it took his sleep fogged mind a moment to understand he was sleeping on his husband.

"Oh!" He pulled away and couldn't stop the cold shiver of worried fear that overcame him.

He didn't get far. A hand, strong and steady, caught the back of his head and soothed over his hair. "Shhhh... it's okay." Liam whispered.

Deseem froze. Logic said to slip away. He hadn't been invited and it certainly was immodest to be literally pressed against his husband's side but Liam's hand kept petting his hair. The gentle touch pressed downward slightly and Deseem didn't want to fight against something he wanted. Carefully, he lowered his head back down onto the shoulder he'd been sleeping against.

The heartbeat returned below his ear. It was a steady thudding beat but soothing. One of his arms was trapped between their bodies, hand clenched to fabric, and the other had been tossed across Liam. It rested now on his husband's chest and Deseem was frightened to move it. All the relaxed ease of sleep had disappeared when understanding had dawned but as the hand continued to stroke over his head Deseem found his body easing. Bit by bit he eased back against his husband, his body going languid and molding to the taller man. Liam sighed and Deseem listened to the breath rush from under his ear.

"Did you sleep well?" Liam asked but Deseem was unsure. His husband's voice sounded odd, wistful and distant and more than a touch sad.

"I'm sorry, my husband." Deseem answered but for being sorry he found himself unwilling to try to pull away again. It felt very nice, the feel of his body curled against his husbands.

"No." Liam answered but Deseem wasn't sure he believed the words. From how he was laying he couldn't see his husband's eyes. "Don't be."

The hand kept petting his hair and Deseem found he liked that also. There was an air to the room, as if his husband was lost in thought and Deseem stayed still and left it alone. He found himself grateful for it, it allowed him to stay where he'd woken up, warm and secure and being touched. That was a new sensation and one that surprised him, his craving to be touched.

"I keep trying to imagine what it was like for you."

Liam's voice resounded under his ear and it tickled a little and made Deseem smile in spite of the serious tone. "Husband?"

"Raised the way you were, cloistered...literally never touched..."

"Oh." The smile disappeared. "It was how it was."

"This is okay you know..."

"Husband?"

"This... being close like this... I don't get touched often either..."

Even in Bastion and not his native tongue, Deseem heard the wistful loneliness. His husband was telling him that he was lonely also. That seemed impossible, Liam seemed so steady, so content most of the time. "I find...I...I like this very much." He whispered against the warm chest.

"You know you're safe here, right? That we won't...I won't just toss you aside. You know that

right?"

The words set a fluttery uncertainty into Deseem's stomach. Reassurances made him nervous. "I believe what my husband tells me."

The hand continued to gently stroke his hair but Liam didn't speak. Not for long moments and if that hand had stilled Deseem would have wondered if his husband had drifted back to sleep. As the moment passed without a scolding, some of the nervousness faded from Deseem and he tried to close his eyes and just enjoy the closeness.

"Why did you do it?" Liam whispered, his voice twisted and strained.

Deseem's mind instantly spun over all the things he'd done trying to find which one he was being questioned over. The rooms weren't perfectly maintained, that made him fearful of a beating. He'd been honest, or as honest as he could be, but he'd also held back some of his thoughts so maybe Liam knew and was calling him on that. Or, it was likely, that his husband was referring to the incident in the shower the other night. That had been the major difference in their normal patterns and really it was Deseem that had pushed for it to happen. Maybe he wasn't supposed to, maybe he'd done wrong by asking to stay, for responding to the sight of his husband aroused.

"Husband?" He'd learned not to assume. It was a game his father would play trying to see which sin he'd take credit for. He'd always guess wrong and end up being punished twice over for the sin he'd confessed to and the one he'd been accused of. If Liam wanted him to admit to which he thought was his greatest failing, he'd ask him to guess.

"I've thought about it...a lot over the years but more so lately. Really since before we were wed and I saw your eyes, it seems like every still moment has me thinking about it. I've always wanted to know why someone from his court would risk so much but to find out it was you, his own son? Why did you do it?" Asking why was a pathway to madness because most times there was no answer to it. He'd accepted that but some part of him still needed to know more.

"Oh." Deseem answered and tried to gather his thoughts. It felt like a lifetime ago since he cowered in his tent and made that choice. "I...it was just a whim..." The truth was too raw, too brutal to share and he wasn't sure he could risk being so vulnerable to anyone.

"Oh." Liam sighed but the hand stilled in Deseem's hair. Under his ear he could hear his husband draw a few deep breathes and the way his heartbeat thudded faster for those breaths. "Well, we should get up, the day is getting late..."

The words were no longer open and raw. Again his husband had withdrawn behind the steady unhappy half frown he always wore and the guarded uneasy that Deseem would know he'd find in his eyes. The body below him moved a little, shifting in a silent plea to escape and Deseem felt something in his own body crack apart.

His hand on Liam's chest spasmed and he clutched at the fabric. "No." He forced out. "I'm sorry....I...she screamed." He wasn't sure if he could share something so honest, so important to him without screaming himself but he suddenly knew he had to.

"Dorena?"

"Yes and....and my sister. When they took her to be cleansed, she screamed for days and I couldn't... I couldn't..." He was gasping for breath now and trying not to panic. "She killed herself."

Liam was silent, surprised at the sudden honesty and not sure he was really ready for it. "Your sister."

Deseem nodded before he tucked his face tighter to Liam's chest. "No one told me that she'd.... my brother did that day and then there was more screaming..."

"And that's why?"

It would be easy to leave it there. Liam seemed contented with the neat tidy answer. "No, partly but...my sister she was, she was the only person that...and I let them..."

The hand soothed over his head again. "It doesn't sound like you'd have been able to help her."

"I didn't try!" The words spilled out. "Oh, God have mercy on me I didn't even try! She killed herself and I was alone and they were going to do the same to me... and there was screaming and I just...I couldn't...I..." He tried to follow his husband's example and draw a few long slow breaths to calm himself but what really calmed him was when Liam pulled him a little closer. "I wanted to....I'd hoped..."

"What?" Liam asked gently.

"I am not a good wife." Deseem answered miserably. "I am traitor!" The words blurted out. "I wanted to hurt my father, take something he wanted away from him!"

"Deseem..."

"I couldn't stand it, I couldn't stand to hear another woman screaming while I did nothing. I couldn't stand being paraded around as a good bride I couldn't take another single moment! I..." He was shivering on the edge of panic again, so much of what he'd felt he'd bottled up for so long that now it felt like it would consume him. "I hoped they would learn it was me and kill me! I betrayed my father and my house and am not to be trusted! I am a traitor! I should have been put to death and had my shame ended...you should kill me before I betray your house, my husband, I am not to be trusted!"

"Shhh..." Liam tried to sooth. "No one is going to kill you. It's not like I didn't know already that you were the one that freed me and what that would mean to your father." He petted the dark hair again and tried to keep his own thoughts steady. "Did your father find out it was you?" He couldn't speak the man's name, not and stay somewhat calm. Against his chest Deseem nodded. "I tried to...I called lightning to burn the tent. I will be honest too, it wasn't just to hide that you'd helped us but I needed to destroy that place I... If I'd had the strength I would have torn the entire camp apart, killed everyone there, even you." He closed his eyes. "I'm not proud to admit that. I wasn't....I wasn't myself." He could still feel Deseem trembling against him, caught up in his own emotions and Liam hadn't really intended to hurt him with his questions. He'd only wanted to poke at his own wounds a little.

He forced his own shoulders to relax and hoped some of his own ease would sink in to Deseem. "What your father was doing was wrong. It isn't disloyal to stand up against your leader when they're wrong." It was very noble to say but if he could have gotten his hands on someone that knew anything about the attack that had killed his sister, he'd have made them scream too until they talked. It was easy to say one was right and one was wrong, one would be for information and the other for sadistic pleasure but both should be wrong. If he was going to be truly honest he had done things just as horrible during the war and that was his own shame. "I...gods I never thought I'd hear myself say this to anyone from Bastion but I trust you Deseem. I don't believe you'd betray me or my family. I...I trust that you will be loyal to your new life. I must trust you to be able to sleep beside you and I have been sleeping, soundly."

"You hate my people." Deseem dared to say.

It wasn't a question but Liam answered anyway. "I'm trying not to."

"My father should have killed me."

"No." The idea of Deseem having been murdered hurt him. "No, don't say that. I've thought about the boy that helped us a lot over the years. I have...I've always wanted to know why. I owe you my life Deseem and more. If you hadn't...I'm not afraid to die but she was my wife. Your father could have done what he liked to me but she was my wife...I..."

Deseem squirmed and moved so he could half sit up and look at his husband. The white hair was a mess, it was caught in a myriad of tangles from his tossing and turning while he slept but the blue eyes were closed. Gently, Deseem reached out and touched the side of Liam's face. "It seems both our wounds are still fresh. I'm sorry I was unable to save your wife."

The touch soothed and made his skin feel on fire at the same time. Liam opened his eyes and caught the slender hand as it retreated in one of his own. "You did save her. She was a warrior and didn't fear death but her people value dying free above all else. You gave her that. It's a debt I can't ever repay. Your father, he hurt you because of the mercy you showed us."

Deseem nodded.

"That's why he would starve you."

"He needed me to marry to secure his allies. He couldn't kill me."

"But he made you wish he would." Golden eyes darted up and away and Liam knew the truth of it.

"I betrayed him, it was his right. The belt... her belt... he made me care for it as a sign of the shame I had brought him. I was required to keep it over my door, clean and in sight"

"It wasn't a trophy."

"No."

"You didn't keep it to..."

"No, I only brought it with me because..." the reasons that had been so clear felt fuzzy now. "I was frightened to disobey, frightened if I didn't keep taking care of it he would....do worse things." He studied the hand holding his own, his husband still hadn't released his grip. He liked the contrast, the strong, more squared off fingers, pale and work roughened compared to his own darker, more slender fingers. "It doesn't make much sense now, I'll never see him again but it felt very real..." He sighed. "I didn't free you to be kind or brave or noble. I did it for selfish reasons, I'm sorry, my husband."

"The results matter more. I've just been haunted by wondering. It..." He studied the down turned face and while the coloring was the same as many of his enemies, he didn't see an enemy before him. "Have you ever seen war, Deseem?"

"No, my husband."

"I hadn't either. Trained for it, studied it, prepared for it, all Watchers do. We're not Guards, we go where things are the worst, try to use training and magic to turn the tide. Most of us die long before retirement. Training for it isn't the same as being in the middle of a battle. I...what I can do? It's a commodity. I was needed and I don't regret it. I have no doubts what I did saved countless Corena lives but...Jas tells me it's not in my nature to be a killer but I can kill, much too easily. I am not proud of it, far from it, but I did what I had to. I wasn't...I guess in some ways I still don't, I have trouble viewing your people as humans. I saw all of Bastion as objects that needed to be eliminated, monsters that needed to be removed. Less than the people I knew, less

than what we are. It made it easier to do what I had to do. I was going to kill you. That night...as soon as my hands were free..."

Deseem nodded. "I thought you would."

"I couldn't. I wanted to but I couldn't, you'd risked everything to show mercy, apologized for not being able to do more. For the first time in months, more, I saw your people as just people, not monsters. I almost..."

"You didn't." Deseem answered smoothly. Part of his training to be a priest was to hear confessions, to sooth troubled minds, but he'd never applied that skill to anyone. A few weeks ago he wouldn't have been bold enough and again he felt a surge of gratitude to his new husband for having a Soulhealer return his mind to him. "It was a war, things were done but I know first hand that my husband is a good man. I offer prayers of thanksgiving every day for that fact."

There was no sarcasm in the voice but it made Liam grin in a lopsided bitter way. "I'm going to need more than prayers if we stay in bed too much longer. Prince or not, if I don't teach my classes the Dean will not be amused. Trust me, she can lecture you on responsibility for hours." He stroked his fingers of the hand he was holding, fragile feeling and delicate but not weak. "And you have lessons too."

"And the Healers."

Liam leaned forward and kissed his husband. Not on the lips like he wanted to but on the side of the man's face. "Than we'd better start the day. Going to take me an hour to get the knots out of hair as it is."

"I could..." the shy kiss made him shiver and want a bolder one. "I could help comb it...if you'd like?"

His instinct was to say thanks but refuse. Liam liked doing things for himself and didn't like being fussed over but he stopped himself. Deseem wasn't likely to fuss and he understood the risk and effort it took to make even such a tiny offer.

He nodded. "I'd like that." It was the right choice because it earned him a shy smile.

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Home

Snowflakes and Embers

Chapter Forty Four

They lingered so long over the morning that Liam was late. It would have been faster to shower together or shower and bathe at the same time but he hadn't wanted to risk it. So they took turns

on the pretense of saving hot water, Liam rushing through his own just in case, and avoided any more unnerving contact. By the time they were dressed for the day, hair combed and braided, breakfast eaten and cleaned up, he had to go straight to his first class. Not that he minded, the delay had been well worth it and for the first time he felt like Deseem was really being honest with him. That felt good, that felt like a start. It made him feel less trapped for the first time since being recalled from the coast and it showed. His students glanced at each other with uncertain looks, not used to seeing him without a frown fixed to his face.

He didn't care, his thoughts were distant and as soon as his first class ended he hurried over to the palace. It was a place he preferred to avoid and as he stalked its halls he tried to look as set and stubborn as he could. One of the things he'd learned over the years was that if he looked like he was busy, people tended to not stop him. No one wanted to deliberately annoy a man that could pull the whole building apart without breaking a sweat.

It worked and it only took a few sharp grunted questions to find out which of his family was least busy and where they were. He made it to the door to the meeting room without being harassed about anything stupid. The guard on the door stiffened but since he was a prince they really couldn't stop him without direct orders. Which was a good thing because he wasn't going to stop after he'd made the long walk to the palace.

The door opened on well oiled and balanced hinges and the room it opened into went silent. He knew most of the people in the room by site, all ranked and trusted advisors but Liam ignored them and their wide eyed stares. All that mattered was that he'd found his mother and with her his brother.

"Liam?" She questioned as he took a step into the room but kept a hand on the door.

"Sorry for the intrusion, mother, but I'm between classes. The Venitua ritual is a few days away..."

She nodded. "Yes."

"With your permission, I'll attend it."

She glanced to Malcome but her oldest child had no more idea of what her youngest was planning than she did. "A direct line family member isn't required for another three rituals, you don't have to."

He nodded. "I know, but with your permission I'd like to volunteer."

"Of course..." Liam had never volunteered to attend the ritual once.

"Thanks." Liam forced a smile he hoped was disarming. "Sorry everyone, please, continue..." He bobbed his head in a small bow and stepped from the room, shutting the door behind him and grinning at the shocked uncertain looks he'd just earned. "That'll give the gossips something to whisper about."

Deseem sat on his blanket in the garden, his veil around his shoulders and felt horribly exposed. Liam had come back home for lunch but had to hurry away before Watcher Bishick could arrive for his lesson. It would be the first time he'd be alone when the man arrived. It felt wrong but he managed to sit, calmly, and wait. He was aware that a few weeks ago just the thought alone

would have sent him into a fear induced panic.

"Afternoon, my prince." Bishick greeted with a smile as he came around the corner of the garden.

"Watcher Bishick." Even speaking to another man without his husband giving repeat and express daily permission felt wrong but he did it. It felt good even if it knotted his stomach up.

"We're going to have to find another place to hold these lessons, it's going to be too cold out here soon. May I?" He asked formally and knew better than to sit without permission.

Deseem nodded and watched as the Watcher folded himself down onto the blanket with ease. He may have been proud of the advances he was making but he still found it difficult to meet the other man's eye.

"I brought you something." He offered the book he'd carried over to Deseem.

It took a moment but Deseem accepted the book. He had to focus hard but the words didn't float away, he just didn't understand them. When he opened the book he found Bastion writing along side words he didn't know.

"It's a textbook of vocabulary, see? The words are in both Trade and Bastion. I know you're still having trouble reading but as you can, this might help you."

He flipped through the pages and found sections on sentences and vocabulary. "This says how to speak in Trade?"

"Partly, yes. It'll compliment our lessons."

He closed the book and bowed his head, holding the book close to his chest. "Thank you."

"You're most welcome. I thought we'd go over some basic vocabulary today."

Deseem had to make a choice and it wasn't an easy one. He swallowed hard and clutched his book. He'd met a Guardian, he believed in what he'd experienced. "Watcher Bishick?"

"Yes?"

"I...I want to learn as quickly as I can. I want to learn Trade. Any help you can offer, I'll gratefully accept."

"Beyond this lesson?" He thought about it and nodded. "I tell you what, I have a student, a young woman. She's quite good. I can send her over every morning to help tutor you. It'll do her a lot of good too, she'd benefit to hear your accent." He grinned. "I speak like a farmer, you speak like a prince. Is that what you mean?"

Deseem nodded. "I need to learn Trade."

"May I ask the sudden urgency?"

He swallowed hard but had already decided he had to trust, if not the man, the rank. "I had a good day yesterday."

The young man said it as if that explained everything but Bishick didn't have any more clue than before. "I don't understand."

"I haven't had a good day in...well..." He glanced up and back down quickly. "A very long time. I want to learn Trade so I can learn more about my husband and his people and his ways. I want

to have more good days." More days naked in the shower, hot steam like a blanket around him, Liam whispering in his ear while he stroked himself...

Bishick wasn't sure why Deseem would blush a little at wanting to have a good day and he wasn't going to ask. "I think it's a very good idea to want to learn and I'll help you however I can. I promise."

"Thank you." He bowed a little, a grateful bob of his head. He may have been a prince but he'd been raised to respect his tutors and was used to striving for the perfection they had demanded.

"Good, now let's see how much you remember from yesterday." If nothing else, the boy was trying now and that often made all the difference. He'd have Deseem with a passable understanding of Trade in no time.

Bishick normally would have waited for Jas to arrive before leaving but he had a class and she was late. "I'm sure she'll be here soon."

The man didn't look like he was upset at lingering but he kept glancing out toward where the Watcher Trainees buildings were. "It's okay, you do not have to wait with me."

Bishick suddenly understood how it looked, and how most people in the boy's past would have been eager to get away from him. He smiled brightly. "No, it's okay, really, I don't mind. I like your company."

Deseem rolled his eyes but the Watcher had again glanced off to the buildings he should be heading toward. "I'm not a child, or stupid."

"Huh?"

"I know you're only staying because you're worried for me but I'm not a child, I do quite well alone. More, I'm not stupid, I know you have many more responsibilities than babysitting me. Go. I'll be fine. I'll go inside and study my new text until she arrives."

"Well..."

He straightened his spine and sat as tall and proud as he could. "I have given my word to my husband to not harm myself."

His uncertainty dissolved and Bishick nodded. "And I believe you will keep that word." He sighed and glanced down the pathway. "You're sure you're okay with my leaving?"

It was kind of ironic given that before he tried to end his life most of his day was spent alone, Liam at work and no one around he could speak to but everything had changed when he'd opened his wrist. "I will be fine, now leave."

Bishick bowed slightly, the small nod of a head a Watcher gave anyone they respected. "Very well, I'll go, and thank you. You should know, I've never once thought of you as a child or as stupid. In fact I think you may be far more intelligent than most everyone here suspects." He unfolded himself from the blanket and straightened his uniform. "I'll send my student over to introduce herself to you. Be gentle with her, she's still learning Bastion."

"Thank you." He nodded. There were more reassurances and a promise to continue where they'd left off tomorrow and finally the Watcher was on his way to his next responsibility. Deseem stayed outside for a few moments longer before he stood and gathered the blanket up. There were no walls around his garden and it didn't feel secure or proper for him to be out in it alone. The compulsion to self cloister himself was weaker but still there and he knew he'd be more comfortable indoors.

Inside his rooms he moved to put the blanket away without thinking about it and moved right after to straighten the room. When he was finished only the textbook remained out, sitting on the table. He had no real place to put it. It didn't belong with Liam's books because it wasn't one of Liam's. He had no real place to put anything that was his, which was an odd thought and one he hadn't considered. There was really nothing in the set of rooms that was his, he had very little. His clothing had space in the wardrobe but he didn't consider that his since he hated the dresses so. His jewelry was in neat boxes on the vanity and while Bastion men wore as much gold as a Bastion woman he hadn't put any of it back on. He had no cosmetics, no books, no sentimental keepsakes.

All he really had was the bag of his sewing supplies and the wedding ring on his finger. Those he considered his. The ring because it was given to him and felt like his. It was beautifully made and soothed him when he was worried. The sewing supplies he actually didn't mind. Being able to make things prettier or more functional was a useful skill and he'd altered several of his dresses to fit better which is something he'd never imagined he'd be able to do.

Neither one took up much space in the rooms. In fact for the first time it occurred to him how little he actually ever had. Nothing he owned before was really his, it was his father's when it all came down to it. The jewelry he had was always his father's or his brother's and now his husband's if he wanted to be technical. He'd never owned a book before, it had always been palace property. He'd never had say over what plants were put in his garden or removed, what he wore or didn't, what he studied, what his furniture was like, nothing. While that hadn't really changed, for the first time it occurred to him how little of anything ever showed anything of his own tastes or style.

It didn't upset him so much as make him think. Even if he had a say in things, he had no idea what he'd do differently, what he'd actually prefer. The thought left him feeling a little uneasy so he brushed it aside to sit down at the table with his new book. He had something to study now and he'd always learned very well from text. He could pick up Trade faster with the extra lessons and the textbook, he knew he could.

Only by the time Jas arrived, breathless and with her face flushed, Deseem was sick. His head hurt, his stomach churned and it was all because he still couldn't read without feeling like he should stop. When he'd pushed past that, he started to feel really, really bad. He hated it and hadn't stopped and now wished he had and hated himself for not being well enough to read.

"Sorry I'm so late, we had a bit of trouble at the Hall, but it doesn't matter you can't understand a word I'm saying." Jas said quickly as she came into the room. "Bishick left I assume." She hoped her smile and friendly tone would sink and she tried to softly project her apology for being so late.

Only, Deseem wasn't the least bit receptive. He sat at their table, a book open before him and looked stubborn and sick and unhappy. When he glanced up his skin looked a little pale but his eyes flashed in emotion she oddly found difficult to read.

"Hey you okay? What's happened?"

The question sunk in and for the first time Deseem spoke to her without lowered eyes and forced modesty. The words were in Bastion and she had no idea of their meaning but he spat them out with a disgusted, upset tone.

"I don't understand."

That only set Deseem off more and the more he spoke the more animated he became. He gestured at his head and the book and her and she wasn't sure what to make of any of it. When he paused for breath he looked at her like she should understand and when she didn't he continued on his rant. She could feel his growing frustration and anger but without any means to communicate she had nothing specific to work with.

"Okay...okay...you're upset, I understand that." She tried to sooth but the rapid words in Bastion only grew faster. "Well I wanted you to try to communicate more...Shhh shhh settle...."

Deseem threw up his hands in frustration and dropped back down into his chair, muttering what sounded to her like curses.

She could call for a translator there were several in the palace and one would do but she didn't. Jas really doubted that Deseem would speak so freely to a stranger and really it was a high compliment that he'd been willing to get so emotional with her. He might be honest with Bishick but the man would be in the middle of a class, a formal, sit down classroom class. The interruption would be noticed and half his students were first or second years and they would boldly gossip.

"Okay. I get it. Let's go." She shooed at him trying to get him to stand up but he sat there, scowling at her with a look she was sure he'd learned from Liam. "Come on, let's go." Finally she sighed and moved over and took his hand. Deseem jerked back but she tightened her grip. "Liam, let's go to Liam...Liam." She tugged at his hand in the direction of the door. "Liam."

"Liam." Deseem repeated carefully. He licked his lips and glanced around the room. "Husband." He said in Trade.

"Yes! Let's go find Liam..."

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Chapter Forty Five

Understanding, careful and cautious, slowly dawned on Deseem and he stood up when she tugged on his hand again. "Liam, husband." He said in Trade and picked up his book.

Experimentally, she tugged on his hand and led them to the bedroom and the garden doors there and Deseem followed. When she opened the door he pulled his hand free but she held the door open and nodded toward the garden. "Liam."

He nodded and followed her outside. He hoped he understood and it would be okay to follow her. Liam had never forbidden him to find him during the day or forbidden him to leave their garden and he had said to trust the woman Soulhealer cousin of his. Just because he was going to trust her didn't mean he was going to let her touch him, he could walk without being led.

Only it was a long walk, farther than he'd expected. The valley was huge and he'd seen some of it but really hadn't gone exploring. Now he knew he shouldn't, he'd easily become lost in the maze of buildings, gardens and grounds. Jas seemed to know where she was going and he followed hoping it was so. Around the buildings they went and he soon was facing pastures.

Large areas of the valley, to the side and close to one end of the forest, were fenced in and horses moved around in small herds. It was pretty to see and he started to understand now why the buildings were all clustered to one side of the valley. Large stables and barns were built in neat rows, some buildings he wasn't sure what the function was for, the doors were too small for a stables and it appeared those buildings had several floors.

It was down toward there that they went and to one of the buildings that Deseem figured was not a stable. Jas took them inside without pause or concern that maybe they shouldn't be there but Deseem wasn't so at ease. People were everywhere now, those in Watcher black and the Guards in the rich blue moved with confidence but the vast majority were young men and women, students. The Watcher trainees were in black with large grey strips down the sides of their pants and bands of gray on their sleeves, the older ones had only one band of grey, the younger several. Some had the mask pendent around their wrist but most didn't and all of them stopped and turned to look at him. It made him want to pull the veil up from his shoulders to cover his hair and face.

Inside the building the hallway was wide but plain. Simple wood and stone with a staircase near the entrance. Jas ignored that and led them down the hallway, past wide wood doors set at long intervals apart to finally stop at one. She smiled and babbled something in Trade before turning to knock lightly.

There was no waiting for an answer, she knocked and opened the door. But she didn't go in, instead she waved a little and let Deseem go in front of her. He moved uneasily but complied, eyes to the floor and wondered if he'd made a horrible mistake. Around him he heard people moving, feet shuffling but he didn't look up.

"Deseem?"

He knew the voice and relief flooded him. He clutched the book tighter and glanced up to find a room with a tall ceiling and wood floors. Simple stools were being used for chairs, ones that would stack easily to be moved out of the way and the students, all in Watcher black and all with only minimal grey for adornment, were standing. They must have stood when he'd come in and most likely offered the small bow of respect but he'd been too uneasy to notice. Caught in his husband's deep blue eyes, he found he forgot what he was supposed to say.

Liam glanced to his students and to Jas and Deseem. He knew the look on Deseem's face and knew the boy wasn't going to speak. "Jas? What's going on? Is everything okay?"

"I need a translator. I'm sorry, it was important."

Jas wouldn't have brought Deseem here if it wasn't and really it must have been for the boy to be so willing to follow her. He nodded. "Very well. All of you..." He turned to his students. "You're getting a reprieve. Tomorrow I expect you to be able to tell me how you managed to screw up so badly yesterday. Think outside the textbooks, actual escape and evade methods aren't so simple. Now, until then, dismissed."

All the trainees were in their final year or years and all too disciplined to gossip in front of him but Liam knew the moment they were out in the hallway there would be whispers. That was okay, it might do some good to have it whispered about that Deseem was actually seen by people. There had been some rumors that the Bastion prince was dead, or disfigured or that Liam kept him locked up. Even a handful of people seeing him would help change those rumors.

"Now what's this about?" Liam asked Jas when the door was shut behind the last of his students.

"He's been ranting at me, almost yelling at me and I don't understand."

"And you couldn't get a palace translator?"

"Liam do you honestly think he's going to tell a stranger two words about what's bothering him?"

He sighed and knew she was right. "Ranting you say?"

She raised an eyebrow.

"What's this about, Deseem?" He switched to Bastion and watched his tone.

"Husband, I'm sorry."

"Jas says you were upset, tell me."

He struggled with it, fighting with himself and having to make several false starts before he could get the words to come. "Make her fix me!" He finally declared in a sharp burst of words and breath.

"She's trying to..."

"No!" Deseem shook his head. "No, make her do it all, now. I can't... I can't..." He drew a deep breath and remembered who it was he was snapping at. "Watcher Bishick, he gave me this." He shoved the book at Liam. "But I can't read it, I can a little and it hurts. I...a couple of weeks past I didn't see how much I had lost, now I see it and yet I can't move beyond it. Please, husband, please, I can't continue like this. Make her fix me, now, or have her cleanse me so I do not see how broken I am!"

Hearing so much open emotion in Deseem's voice would have been surprising enough but the boy's eyes sparked with pride and stubbornness. Liam felt caught in their amber depths and was glad he'd dismissed his students. He doubted if one of them was even able to understand basic Bastion but two of them had strong enough Empathy to have picked up on Liam's instinctual attraction to the proud demands in Deseem's eyes.

To cover it and hopefully keep Jas from picking up on it, he opened the book. It didn't surprise him to find it was a textbook, one he'd studied from while learning Bastion. Reading poetry and verse had made Deseem sick, trying to read a textbook and force his damaged mind to read would have been doubly hard.

"I'm sure she's doing everything she can."

Deseem folded his arms over his chest. "Please! Please my husband, I will still be a good wife... a good spouse...please..."

Liam glanced to where Jas stood and switched to Trade. "He says for you to either fix him or cleanse him."

"What?"

"He's..." Liam glanced to the textbook. "He's healed enough to notice all that's been taken from him and he either wants it fixed or to have him put back to where he couldn't notice. Can't say as I can blame him. Are you working as quickly as you can?"

"Well...no." She admitted and glanced from Liam to the Deseem who stood with accusing eyes. "I've been proceeding with caution and care so as to not hurt him. I figured we had plenty of time to do this slowly."

"So you can Heal him faster?"

She shrugged. "It's possible yes, but it'll cause him pain. Like rebreaking a bone that's healed wrong, only unlike a bone we've the luxury of realigning things one fragment at a time."

"What does she say?" Deseem asked in a tone that bordered on demanding.

It startled Liam but not in a bad way and he switched to Bastion. "She says to work faster will cause pain."

"I'm not afraid of pain!"

"I wouldn't like to see you hurt."

"Husband, being this way hurts me! To see what I am? To be caught in these compulsions? To be frightened all the time and sick to read a few lines? That book? I would have devoured it before and now a few paragraphs and I am in too much pain to continue. I do not like what I am, what I've become. I can see it now, please, please, I will accept any pain if it will fix this. I am not a coward."

"No... you aren't." Liam looked to Jas who was frowning and almost as upset as Deseem was but for different reasons. "You can un-do what was done to him faster?"

"Liam, it's not a good idea..."

"But you can do it?"

"Yes."

"How few Healings would you need? Would this be a one time thing or would you have to hurt him repeatedly?"

"This shouldn't be rushed simply because he's impatient. I can fix the damage without hurting him further, it's just going to take time."

"Jas...you've never been hurt, badly hurt. I wouldn't like to see him harmed but I know what he's feeling and it's not impatience. We can't keep asking him to be more independent and when he asks to have a say in his own treatment turn around and act like he's a child. What would it be like to do this as quickly as possible?"

"Liam..."

"Tell me."

She frowned further but Liam was stubborn and with both the men glaring at her she knew neither would budge. "I'll need help, he'd have to be unconscious. It would take several hours. When he wakes up, he'll be in pain and there will be very little we can do to ease it."

"For how long?"

"The worst of it? Hours? Days? It'll depend on how well he heals on his own. Think of it as swelling, how long until the swelling goes down or bruises fade. After the worst of it, he'll be sore for days or weeks longer."

"And you can undo what was done to him?"

"I can undo as much of what was done to him as I can. There is no saying how much that'll be. Will he be able to read again, learn again? Most likely. Will he get his magic back? I don't know."

"Will he feel like himself?"

She shrugged. "As much as our skills can give him. There's only going to be so much that can be done, either slowly and carefully or all at a time and the rest will depend on how he heals on his own from it. Liam, I don't recommend this, I never recommend any unnecessary pain if it can be avoided."

"I agree with you. I'd have him avoid any further pain but Jas, the choice isn't ours to make. If it won't hurt him to do it faster and it's what he wants, I'll back him on it."

She would have scolded more but Liam didn't look happy about the situation and when he motioned a little she fell silent. Liam turned the motion from one of soothing to taking Deseem's elbow and leading the other man a few steps away to sit on one of the now empty stools.

"Deseem," Liam started and handed back the book. "She says they can do it. It'll take a couple of Soulhealers, you'll have to be put unconscious but when you wake up it's going to hurt for hours or days even. She says there won't be much they can do to sooth it and it doesn't sound like she means a little hurt."

Deseem clutched the book and studied its cover. "But it won't hurt forever?"

"No, but even after the worst of it fades, there will still be smaller pains for a while."

"How much? Will it hurt like when they did this?" He wasn't sure he could stomach that.

"I don't know. Let me ask." He switched from Bastion to Trade and asked the question.

Jas shrugged. "I don't think so but I can't know since I wasn't there for the original damage. It'll be like a really, severe, migraine. He's not going to be able to eat much if anything, he'll be dizzy and light sensitive, at the very least."

Liam nodded and quickly explained.

"Oh." Deseem sighed. "I can accept that. Please, let them do this?" He glanced up and caught Liam's eyes. "Please."

"I don't wish you hurt."

"Which is a worse pain? A few days of being ill and a chance to not be so...so broken or lingering for weeks or longer as this half thing?" He was pushing and he knew he shouldn't. He was still a wife and bride and knew his place. Deseem stopped gripping the book so tightly and dropped his eyes. "I will accept whatever it is my husband feels is best for me." It hurt to say that now but he said it.

"Deseem, I think whatever you feel is right for you is what's best. I just don't like seeing you

harmful. If you're sure this is what you wish, this is what you'll have."

"Truly?"

"It's not my choice, Deseem, it's yours."

"Thank you."

The warmth in his husband's voice made him smile a little. "Jas?"

"Don't even say it I can tell you're letting him do this." She shook her head but seeing them interact kept her from frowning. "I'm going to need a few days to make this happen. Have to find some people to help, they'll want to look around first before hand. Make sure he knows we're not doing this today."

"I'll tell him. Thank you Jas."

"Don't thank me, this isn't doing him any favors by rushing it. Stubborn men... you'll see he finds his way home?"

"I will."

"Good." She nodded and left, mumbling to herself about men and foolishness.

"She'll need a few days to get it together." He explained to Deseem who sat in his classroom with wide eyes and looking out of place. "So, now you've seen where I teach."

"I'm sorry to have bothered you." Which was only partially the truth. Knowing that they were going to really, finally, fix him was worth making Liam angry.

"Oh, it's no bother. My students? We're generally outside in the forest but I was a little rough on them the other day, showed them how one person could avoid the whole lot of them, so I thought to keep them inside today to go over what they did wrong. A day more to think it over will do them good. See? Here?" He waved to the building. "These aren't traditional classrooms. This is an area for physical activity, to learn more specialized fighting, wilderness survival, horsemanship, things like that." He reached over and tapped the textbook Deseem sat holding. "That's about the only book in the whole place. Come, let's walk home." He stood up and gave Baxter the right signal. The large dog had been sitting so still and quiet in the corner to virtually be overlooked. At the small gesture the dog bounded over to circle around and rub against Deseem in greeting. "Silly dog."

"My husband is a good teacher." Deseem said as he stood up to follow, scratching the wiggling dog whenever he'd hold still long enough.

The words made Liam laugh. "No...no not at all. I'm an awful teacher. I've no patience for it but I learned a lot of this the hard way during the war and experience is a valuable thing to pass along. I'm trying." He held the door open and Deseem stepped out into the hallway. The few trainees wandering around tried not to openly stare but he could feel their eyes and from how Deseem held his shoulders and kept his eyes down he felt it too. "You know, they're your age, most fourth years are older than you. Average age of a first year Watcher trainee is fifteen, eighteen or nineteen when they become a Watcher. Guard officers are older, most start at sixteen and finish at twenty."

He held the door to the building and let Deseem and Baxter out into the fresh air. For a change he didn't have to ask Deseem to walk beside him. Whatever it was Jas had been doing was working and Deseem's demands to be fixed were proof of it. It was gradual but the fact that he'd made any demands was a good sign. If the boy got better, and it looked like he might, they really

could find a base for friendship. It was a hope he hadn't really expected to find.

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Chapter Forty Six

"Husband?"

Liam sighed and hoped he wasn't blushing. They'd spent the better part of the afternoon at Healer's Hall where Jas and five other Soulhealers all took their time looking Deseem over and talking to each other in half sentences. Liam's only request was that they didn't do the whole, Heal everything at once thing until after the ritual he'd planned for them to attend. He'd told Deseem about the ritual but he'd been a touch vague on the details.

He sighed. "Let me try again. You know we have many faiths here, yes?"

Deseem nodded solemnly.

"Okay. One of them is a group called the Venitua. They aren't wide spread, actually they have a small ravine city they live in and a temple here and that's pretty much it. They believe that all acts of love and pleasure are sacred rites." He didn't know how to say orgy in Bastion, wasn't sure there was even a word for it. "Their rituals get a little...intimate. No one is unwilling, or required or forced, it's actually...I mean...it's quite beautiful." He knew he was blushing now.

"Okay."

"Okay... well, see they have a tradition. They offer a blessing to the kingdom for the land to be fertile and healthy and the people to prosper. For the kingdom to receive the blessing someone in the direct line of succession must physically receive it in proxy for the land. I've volunteered."

"Yes, my husband." He'd understood that much the first time.

"Since we are wed, we both must go, though you will not be expected to take part in anything."

"Take part?"

"I know it's not your faith. I... there will be a ritual, Hishtock Lorn, and following it there will be the Hishtock Vens. The Hishtock Lorn is a formal ritual, the Hishtock Vens is a celebration of...of love and pleasure. There will be drink and food and...and...people will be intimate with others."

"You mean...Oh." Deseem had to drop his eyes. "I...it does not sound like a modest thing for a

wife..."

"No one will touch you, I swear it. They are quite respectful. Unless you welcome them, you won't be approached."

"I would never!"

"It's okay if you did." He sighed. "I'm not saying you should, just, the choice would be yours. There are people who would trade nearly anything to be invited to one of their rites." Liam half smiled but the look of sheer horror on Deseem's down turned face stopped him. "Anyway, after the main ritual, I will be taken aside to receive the Bendtock Sor, the blessing for the kingdom and once that is done we can go. But I will have to be taken to a side chamber, don't fret, I've arranged for a Priestess who speaks Bastion to be your chaperon. You won't be left alone. Only, Deseem, everyone will be nude, myself included."

Amber eyes the size of saucers rose up and look at Liam like he'd gone mad.

"You won't be. There will be... will be a..." He was beat red now, he knew it. "A cloth....for modesty...but you'll be greatly disrobed..." Deseem naked but for the linen loin cloth, the fabric white against his dusky skin, black hair tumbling everywhere and Liam naked and unable to hide any reactions.

"Husband."

"I know this goes against your teachings but please, it is harmless. Skin is just skin and no one there will be ashamed to be seen. Trust me, the first time I went I thought it would be shocking but it really isn't once you are there. I just...Deseem it'll allow you to see all manner of people... all manner of combinations. They will find it a high honor to know you will be learning of what is pleasure to you by observing them. You'll never be alone for a moment. I swear it, and no one will even make a suggestion to you without your consent."

"This...this is what you want?"

Liam nodded. "It's about the fastest and easiest way for you to learn...to learn more of yourself." His ears were burning now. "I didn't tell you details sooner because I didn't wish you to fret over it. It's this or...or we could go to a..." he wasn't sure how to say brothel either. "A place where people trade time in their bed for coin."

It seemed impossible but Deseem suddenly looked more shocked, more scandalized.

"It's not as sordid as it sounds. It's legal here, and licensed. They are well trained. We could make an arrangement to visit such a place..."

"No!" He knew what a brothel was from stories and gossip and he knew watching wouldn't be what they'd pay to do. It would be immodest to watch this ritual but he knew he'd die of embarrassment at a brothel. "This...this cult...it is their rite, not mine. I...God will understand and I will be respectful to their ways as my husband wishes." It was a loose justification to attend, simply to say it was on his husband's wish. The truth was, knowing what he desired was important to his husband and if this would give Deseem some experience and knowledge to better vocalize his own wishes, that was enough.

Liam let the breath he'd been holding out. "Good...oh thank goodness... I was worried we'd...I mean..." He cleared his throat. "Do you mean it?"

"Mean what, my husband?"

"That you wish to be respectful of their ways?"

"Of course. I wouldn't lie to you."

"Yes, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to imply it. It's just, Deseem, you can't attend as my wife. You are my husband, you must go to this rite as a husband, a young man. Dressed as a Bastion prince not as a bride. You should line your eyes and put on the gold bangles and dress as a Bastion man. They believe deeply in heritage and honoring it but also... I don't mean this to be rude, but the Bastion notion of a Benton being female simply to wed a man...they won't understand it. And...and it would please me to see you dressed as a man."

"Oh."

"I am not fond of the dresses. I understand why you wear them but...I'd like to see you as the young man you are. If only for one night."

There was soft longing in Liam's voice and that more than anything made up his mind. Deseem lifted his head and squared his shoulders. "I will need someone to help me with my eyes." He would compromise. Wear the gold bangle bracelets on his wrists and ankles as a wife would but dress in pants and like a man. He'd braid his hair in the double braids of a wife but paint his eyes with the lines a man wore, not the ones a woman would wear. He wouldn't go veiled but he'd wear one around his shoulders. He doubted his husband would see the compromise and if he did, he doubted Liam would fuss too badly.

It was worth agreeing to see the flash of a quick bright smile come to Liam's face. "Good, I'll send for someone."

It took Liam less time to dress to leave than it did Deseem. He'd pulled on his dress uniform and his shined black boots, brushed his hair out until it fell in a white curtain down his back and gathered his gloves. He couldn't go to the rite armed and he felt a little naked with no weapon on him. It was absurd because he wasn't unarmed so long as he could reach his magic but it was the weight of cold steel that made him feel better.

He'd left instructions with the maid and Deseem had drawn the pattern out for her to copy in black around his eyes so Liam left the room to take Baxter out one final time. The dog couldn't attend and since it would only be for a few hours he was leaving him in their rooms. The afternoon had started to slip away and by now their carriage would be sitting, waiting for them on the lane outside of their garden. He would have just ridden over but he doubted Deseem knew how to ride. It was another thing he add to the mental list of skills the boy should know.

All of that was for another day. They had to get past tonight and then the rough planned Healing and the winter and in the spring they could worry about teaching Deseem to ride. Baxter darted inside and right into the main room to check on the soup bone one of the cooks had sent for him, he'd been protective of the new treat and was loath to leave it out of his sight. Liam barely noticed, the maid stood with her hands clasped in front of her looking happy and when Deseem stood up, Liam knew why.

The boy looked like a young man. He stood up, in pants not the bulky dresses he'd been wearing. The fabric lighter weight with more of a Corena cut to them than Bastion but it didn't matter. He doubted Deseem had been left with any masculine clothes. One of the servants had been kind enough to make sure he was dressed warm enough and they'd even gotten him a cloak. On his ankles over the low cut soft shoes and on his wrists layers of thin gold bangles hung. None of that seemed to really matter, Liam's eyes drifted up to where one of the brightly colored veils was resting around Deseem's shoulders and then higher. He was snared on the thick dark braids, perfectly finished by the maid and they framed his face perfectly. All Liam could see was the boy's amber eyes, boldly raised and meeting his own. The lines now drawn

around them were strong and made Deseem look less fragile and vulnerable.

It made Liam feel weak in the knees and he knew he was staring but couldn't help himself.

"Sir?" the maid asked again and it finally sunk in that she'd been trying to get his attention.

"Yes, sorry."

"Will there be anything else sir?"

"No, thank you, the chamberlain sent the items I requested?"

"Yes sir, on the table in the other room."

"Good, thank you."

She curtsied a little but doubted either man noticed, so intently were they watching each other.

"My pleasure sir."

Deseem waited until the woman was gone. "Am I acceptable, my husband?"

Liam drew a breath and reminded himself that he shouldn't think such thoughts about the boy. "Almost." He forced himself to drop his eyes and moved to follow Baxter into the other room. Sure enough, the two wood boxes sat on the table. Neither one was ornate in nature or fussy and he gathered them both up and took them into the bedroom to place them on the vanity top.

"We're not a people to be fussy over our own royalty. We don't consider my family ordained by God or Gods or whatever to rule, or any wiser or better. We're just stewards, keepers of the promise of the Lanning, replaceable. Go into the market and ask anyone if they'd like to be King or Queen and most will tell you no. Maybe we should fuss more because it would give some greater benefit to offset the difficulties but it's not our way. The formal crowns our rulers wear are the same ones made for Watcher Rosin and Madeline at the time of the Restoration. They are elaborate but my parents only wear them on formal occasions. Everyday, their crown is far simpler and quite a bit like the ones us children wear for any formal event." He flipped the latch and opened the box.

Inside was lined in dark black velvet, same as he remembered. Nestled in the center was a simple gold band, the line of it was interwoven a little in the front into a simple knot pattern that all spouse crowns carried. It was the same crown Bekka and Celeste wore. Carefully, Liam lifted it from the velvet and the gold glowed in the candlelight.

"This is the crown made for the spouse of the fourth child. Rosin, in spite of all the rumors of his relationships with Timeran and Kyal, produced nine children with Madeline. No King or Queen has had more than nine children since and each one has their own crown and one for their spouse or partner. My wife wore this same crown. It's yours now and one day Malcome's fourth born child's partner will wear it after you."

"Husband..." His people didn't have formal crowns for anyone other than the King. Children of the King were given slender gold chains that clipped and wove around their hair and hung a little on the forehead.

Liam lifted the band up and settled it on the dark hair, eased it down to fit over the top of the boy's head to rest with the knot on his forehead. Someone must have taken the boys measurements and fit the crown because it slipped on perfectly. "Even if I'm killed, this crown is yours until Malcome takes the throne and even then until his fourth child weds. Then you will wear the same crown, but in white gold."

Whenever he'd put on his crown, even as a child, he'd felt fake. It had never looked right against his skin and hair when he'd had red hair but now with the white length it just looked fake and melodramatic. He didn't feel like a prince, didn't like the reminder and the weight of the gold on his head made him feel smothered in responsibilities he didn't want. Even if he tried, he still looked like someone they'd picked to play the part of royalty but Deseem, who had never worn their crown before, stood and looked like the prince he was. He projected the dignity, grace and strength Liam always felt he lacked.

"There." He soothed a hand over the dark hair. "It looks good on you." He tried not to remember the last time a spouse of his wore it, tried not to overshadow her memory on him.

Liam failed because Deseem could see the grief in the blue eyes. "Husband."

"It's okay." Liam nodded. "It's our way. You look like a prince." He moved aside so Deseem could see himself and opened the other box. With far less formality he removed his own and settled it with long practice over his own head. When he stood up and pulled on his gloves Deseem was still watching himself with suspicion in the mirror. "You okay?"

Slowly Deseem nodded. "I don't know myself."

Oddly, Liam understood. It was months, years maybe, after the war that he could look himself in the mirror and have any sense of knowing the person he saw there. He slipped a gloved hand into Deseem's. "Give it time, time helps and there is so much new here, so much of your life has changed." That earned the smallest of little quirks of a smile to Deseem's mouth. "Come, we can't be late."

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Chapter Forty Seven

Deseem glanced down to the black leather clad hand curled around his own hand and the casual touch didn't make him startle in fear. In fact, it was nice, safe feeling, made him feel good and he curled his own fingers around his husband's hand before he let the man lead him from their room out into the garden. The sun was getting close to setting and the air had a crisp coolness to it that made him shiver.

"It's cold." He heard himself saying.

Liam turned and grinned a little. "Going to get colder in a few weeks. Here." He wrapped a thin layer of warmer air around Deseem the way he always wove around himself. It was easier than he expected which meant that some part of his mind was getting used to Deseem being around. "Better?"

"Yes, my husband, thank you." It was another small, subtle sign of power but Deseem was grateful for it, he didn't like being cold. Any thoughts of it disappeared when it became clear they were heading for a real carriage.

"Thank you for waiting." Liam acknowledged to the two coachman that stood waiting for them.

"Our pleasure, your majesty." The older of the men said and both bowed.

Deseem was too busy gawking. Four horses were hitched to the rounded wood and glass coach and the carvings were all in the same oak and acorn theme of the royal family. It was beautiful and every bit was polished to gleaming. They didn't have carriages like this in Bastion and tended to more flat open liters with gauzy curtains that offered shade and caught the breezes. Not that he'd ever really ridden in one and the coach he'd been shoved in for his father's tour was closed up, stuffy and ugly.

"We've excellent craftsmen here, they make everything beautiful." Liam explained. "Windows even open to catch the air." He steadied Deseem's hand as he handed the boy inside and as he turned to check with the driver's instructions he caught their shared wink and happy smiles. He raised an eyebrow and they grew serious again. "Are we okay on time?"

"Yes, your majesty and might I say, what a pleasure it is to see you happy again sir."

"Do I look happy?" The younger man blushed and dropped his eyes but the older smiled wider.

"Aye, sir you do, or as happy as such a serious sort as you can look."

"Well, thank you for your concern and well wishes." He nodded and climbed into the back to stop the uncomfortable conversation. To outside eyes, the very fact that he was socializing with anyone other than Lach would seem like a sign that he was happy. Even as a child he'd had few if any friends and it had only gotten worse as he'd gotten older.

He settled in beside Deseem and a moment later the coach lurched forward. "Did you get to see Corinth on your way to the palace?"

"No, my husband, I was ill."

"Oh. Well, feel free to look. It's a beautiful city. We even have a Bastion temple here, couple of districts over. I...we could arrange for you to attend services or whatever it is you'd be going to for worship. If you'd like?" Deseem glanced from the window where the valley passed away outside to look at Liam with sad, serious eyes. "I'd imagine if you were going to be a priest that faith was a large part of your life. Must shock you what a heathen bunch we all are and Watchers tend to only revere the Death Queen."

"I do miss it but...women...God doesn't speak to or hear women. I am not allowed any longer. Thank you for the thought, it was kind."

"You're not a woman, Deseem."

"To my faith I am." He smiled gently to take the sting from it. "I'm content with that, my husband."

"It's not right."

Deseem wanted to protest but he remembered being under his husband's body. Their naked skin slick as it rubbed together and how he'd been taken, his husband's flesh joining with his own. It made him flush a little to remember how he'd been made a wife. Instead of speaking he just dropped his eyes and turned to watch out the window again. They were well into the city before he stopped feeling so feverish and he really started to see the city that passed outside.

"It's beautiful." Deseem sighed and watched another neighborhood slip away.

"Not another city like it anywhere. Every street has something different. You learn Trade, when you can understand the basics, we'll come out into the city. See a dance company or go to the market...if you'd like?"

"So many people...." He felt suddenly a little sick over being out and about in the city and the idea of walking freely around without the coach's protective walls to shelter him wasn't comforting. Only, he wasn't to be cloistered anymore. His husband wasn't going to beat him for being seen or touched accidentally. He had no reason to stay locked away from prying eyes, especially if his husband would be with him. Part of him craved a chance to watch all the life in the city and part of him cowered from it. "I think I might like that." He answered carefully and pressed a hand to the glass window. "Thank you, my husband."

Too soon for Deseem's nerves the coach turned from the road to a small lane and stopped at a gate. Words were exchanged with the driver from a gate keep and in short order they were waved in. The building looked more like a large house than a temple and the coach drove up the drive to a covered area before stopping. Liam hopped out before the drivers could climb down and offered a hand inside to help Deseem out. He wasn't sure he needed the help since he wasn't in a dress but he took the excuse to take Liam's hand.

"Thank you." He nodded as he stepped from the carriage but his eyes drifted to a woman standing near the rather plain looking doors.

She was older than Liam but not old by any means. Her hair fell in a loose tumble down her back but no effort to style it had been made. The brown was ordinary, maybe a little dull but nothing either shockingly beautiful or ugly. Her face was the same, small freckles flecked across her nose and cheeks, her nose was a little too large, her mouth a little too wide to be pretty but her smile made up for it. Even her clothing was ordinary, with a simple shift dress that hung loose and shapelessly over her body. The only hint of decoration was three gold toe rings on each of her feet, simple bands but noticeable on her bare feet.

"Your Majesties." She greeted and bowed deeply. "We were deeply honored at the request to attend tonight."

The rich warm voice and true, bright smile were like a blanket and Liam smiled. "Ninee you shouldn't be out here barefoot, it's cold."

She shrugged. "My heart keeps me warm, please, both of you, come in. It's good to see you again, Liam, you look well."

"So I've been told." Liam motioned for them to follow but Deseem still had his hand snugly nestled in his own and that was enough to guide him. "You received my letter?"

"Yes and I've a room waiting, we can talk privately there."

Deseem startled a little as a young teenager hurried over to shut the door behind them. He couldn't be sure if the child was a boy or a girl, the clothing was as shapeless, pants loose and full under a long sleeved loose tunic offered no clues. The face was neither overly pretty nor masculine and the hair was cut to one length and fell to just above the child's collar. The child glanced up and caught Deseem looking and grinned in a friendly way.

The door opened to two large staircases that peeled off to either side and a small sitting area behind them. The sitting area was tiny and the only way to go was up the wide, light colored wood steps. The stairs and small area were well lit but undecorated and rather plain. It surprised Deseem as much as the child, from what he'd been told of the religious group he'd expected

something more sensual. It wasn't surprising to Liam because he wasn't even looking around as they followed the woman up to a hallway and then down past several doors to one she stopped and opened.

"Thank you." Liam nodded as they entered.

The room was again surprisingly devoid of anything Deseem would consider part of a faith based in love and pleasure. It didn't even have a bed, or a couch or lounge with cushions. There were a few straight backed chairs and a table that had a very tiny pile of cloth. Several people in loose tunic shirts that drifted down to their knees stood waiting for them but on the far side of the room near a woven changing screen.

Ninee watched as Deseem openly studied the room with wide eyes. She deliberately avoided Bastion and spoke in Trade. "You wish for me to escort him."

It wasn't a question but Liam nodded anyway. "He's been cloistered. What little he knows about...relations...he learned on our wedding night."

"Hmm." She nodded but turned to Liam and smiled. "You did a fair job, he seems content. We are deeply honored to be allowed to share in his awakening."

That made Liam raise an eyebrow. "Don't nudge him, just if you could...watch him? See what he desires...."

She bowed. "Of course."

"Deseem, this is Priestess Ninee, she's an elder of the order. She speaks Bastion well and will be your escort in my place. Feel free to ask any questions of her."

Deseem nodded and dropped his eyes. "Yes, my husband."

"It is my honor to serve." She bowed again, this time to Deseem and smiled at them both. "Now, you, must go be ready for the rites. I'll see to it my Prince is well tended."

Somehow the reassurance sounded just the slightest bit suggestive and Liam wasn't sure he liked the overtone. When he caught the sparkle in the woman's amused eyes he knew she'd meant it too. Repressed sexuality was like a wrapped holiday present to her and her order, they'd delight in tempting and showing off trying to unravel it. He almost felt sorry for Deseem.

Almost wasn't enough to cancel the night. "All will be well, I just must leave now. I have place to be for the main rites."

"Yes, my husband."

Liam heard the nervous unease. "If you need me, I will come to you. I promise."

Gold eyes flicked up. "Thank you."

The simple words made Liam smile a little and he nodded before he let one of the waiting priests guide him from the room.

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Chapter Forty Eight

"I have some knowledge of the ways of Bastion." Ninee began. "Please, feel free to speak in frank terms with me. I would like to be a true guide to you."

Deseem squashed the fear of being left alone in a room with several strangers he didn't know because Liam had told him it would be okay. "Do many of your people speak Bastion?"

The question made her smile brightly. "Several yes. It's our way, when Corena is at war, to learn of the people we are in conflict with. War, conflict, hate, violence, are all opposite of what we believe and such states leave people broken and damaged. By knowing another's ways, we can try to understand and maybe by understanding we can bring healing to some of the wounds not of the flesh. Many of us have Soulhealing or Empathy, it tends to call people to our order. So I have made a bit of a study of your people's ways and I promise you, no one will touch you without your say."

"My husband...has he spoken to you of why I am here?" He felt his face blushing and suddenly wished he had been veiled.

"Yes, my Prince."

He glanced to his hands, clasped in front of him. "I wish to be a good wife...spouse....to my husband. He feels it is important for me to be aware of some...things...about myself. I am not comfortable."

"He's wise to suggest it. I will speak frankly with you. You are not a child any longer, my Prince. You are a young man, a healthy young man, to deny an aspect of biology is not healthy. Sexuality is a healthy, natural side of being biological beings. We can help you discover aspects about yourself but what you do with that knowledge will be your choice." She smiled warmly. "Your choice, not even your husbands."

"I am trying."

"Good. But remember this tonight; everyone here is here of their own free will. Everyone here believes that love and pleasure are beautiful. It is okay to look, to ask questions, even, if you wished it, to touch or join in. Just as it's equally okay to be shocked and embarrassed and uncertain, not a soul here will fault you for that."

"Thank you." He nodded and suddenly wondered if a house of pleasure for pay might not have been a better choice.

"Now, if I may, my Prince, would you care to change? The rites will be starting soon." She lifted the fabric from the table and handed it not to Deseem but to one of the male attendants waiting to help.

He knew he was blushing but he nodded. He could do this if he just pretended that the men waiting to help him change were eunuchs. He's allowed his own servants to dress and undress him his whole life with no thought to modesty. These men weren't his servants and pretending they were only offered him the smallest measure of comfort. He held still as they undressed him, carefully moving his hair and folding his discarded clothing. It may have been months since the last time he'd had a servant dress him but Deseem managed to hold still as the long length of soft cloth was woven and wrapped around his hips, between his legs and back around. When they finished he was quite naked but for his jewelry and the wrapped cloth. It covered everything, folded and tucked as it was and even had overhanging flaps of cloth that obscured the skin tight molding of the cloth to his body but he still felt quite naked.

It made him blush and he found he had to keep his eyes down. It was stupid, modestly having lowered eyes wouldn't keep others from looking at him. It wasn't even like he was naked but to be so undressed around strangers felt horribly wrong. It made him want to grab a blanket and run back to his room.

Until he stepped around from the screen and his guide Ninee didn't even blink an eye. Nothing about her reaction to him or her treatment of him changed even a slight bit. He found he was painfully grateful to find her still clothed and the men that had attended him as well. They would undress, Liam had warned him, but he hoped he wouldn't be in a small room alone with them when they did.

"If you are ready, my Prince, it's nearly time."

He wanted to tell her how uneasy he was, how much he just wanted to go home but he couldn't. He was still a prince, maybe of a new kingdom and maybe a wife but he was still a prince. That brought with it some level of required behavior and it also meant he couldn't confess how frightened and uneasy he felt to someone he didn't know intimately. The last thing he was going to say was that he wanted Liam, not when his husband was counting on him to behave.

"Many of our people are scattered about the city, out in the countryside, and only get to gather together for rituals. There is a room for the children, adults take turns watching them so everyone may take part. Those older children are allowed to attend but you will see, they wear white shifts. Those that have come of age were a white cord around their waists and when they wish to join our communities as a full member, they offer the cord to the one they've selected."

Deseem wasn't sure he understood. "Full member?"

"When they no longer wish to be a virgin, the choice is theirs with no pressure."

He felt his face blushing and tried to fight it. "Oh."

Ninee flashed a bright smile. "Quite a shocking difference from what you know, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"It's okay to be shocked. Even here in Corena where most everyone is pretty accepting of ways not their own we're looked at a little oddly. Very few take love and pleasure to such extents as we do but there is too much pain and hate in this world."

That was a line of conversation he didn't want to think about. Being mostly naked in an open hallway, following a strange woman who knew where, was enough of a distraction. It made holding any form of sensible conversation difficult.

"You've known too much of pain and sorrow in your short life. I'm sorry."

Deseem's bare feet nearly stumbled.

"I'm sorry, it's just what we do, find sorrow and try to soothe it." She glanced to the side at the forced neutrality on the young man's face. "How are you finding things here, in your new home?"

"I am honored to be so welcomed by my husband's people."

"We are honored to have you. Here we are now, the main hall is just through this door." She smiled brighter as they approached a small room.

In it were two young teenagers in white shifts, hair cropped to the same length and Deseem wasn't sure of gender on either. His guide greeted them and they smiled and greeted her back in a rapid spatter of words Deseem didn't know. He tumbled them across his mind, hoping something in the phrases would make sense but it all fell away as his guide quite easily slipped out of her own dress and handed the fabric to one of the attendants.

Deseem got an eyeful before he could look away. She wasn't old by any means but her body wasn't perfect either. Things sagged, things shimmied, and bare skin was everywhere. He didn't know where to look, felt sick with embarrassment and ended up seeing everything. He'd seen a woman naked before, the woman his father had taken captive, Liam's wife his mind reminded him. Only she'd been so badly abused it hadn't felt too indecent.

Ninee caught the flash of painful embarrassment and warned the two children with a harsh look not to snicker at their guest's awkwardness. They'd been raised in their ways, where skin was just skin and nothing more and weren't quite old enough yet to really understand that others were far more modest. She shook out her hair. "If you are ready, my Prince?"

Deseem nodded and tried to keep his eyes modestly in place on the floor. Only it was no real escape, worked into the tile pattern below his bare feet were images of men and women tumbled together, posed in obviously explicit postures. They made him blush too and he raised his eyes as he went thru the door simply to avoid those poses, those poses that could so easily be translated to the anatomy of two men.

Raising his eyes was a bad idea. The room was large and open with curtains around the walls on three sides and filled with people. Filled with many, many very naked people, all of them standing together, talking, smiling, laughing as if they weren't stark nude. Only as the door opened they stopped talking and glanced their way, the smiles still as bright and a wave of bows and curtsies swept across the group. Deseem was too stunned to look away. People of all sorts, men and women, young and old, short, tall, toned and flabby, pretty and plain and just human were everywhere. He'd never imagined such variations and part of his mind wanted to know, wanted to look and study and learn but his stomach turned over in fear and panic began to claim him. It was too much, too immodest, too dangerous, surely his husband hadn't intended this, would punish him for it.

Movement of white caught the corner of his eye and Deseem glanced after it. It hadn't been Liam, just a young adult in a white shift moving from the main floor but it turned him far enough that he caught sight of his husband standing on a raised platform to his side with another man Deseem assumed was a priest. Liam was naked and Deseem tried not to let his eyes skim across all the exposed pale skin. He stood out not because of the crown still resting on his head or the mask pendent at his throat but for the long, glossy white shower of hair he wore almost like a robe. It made Deseem wish he'd left his unbraided, he'd have felt less exposed maybe.

Liam had been talking to the man he was standing with but his attention instantly focused on Deseem, the priest continued to talk for a moment before noticing and turning, offering his own bow to Deseem. It was a bow he didn't notice, he was caught in blue eyes and the reassurance he saw there.

"My Prince, we should take our place." Ninee said softly beside him but it wasn't until Liam nodded slightly that the fear backed down enough that Deseem could get his feet to move.

He was led, eyes down and locked on the now unadorned floor, to a small space to the side of the main group. It wasn't quite its own row but it was clear he was not really part of the rites that would take place around him. A small, high, chiming bell sounded as one of the group walked from the back to the front of the room and the people stopped talking and fell into orderly rows. Things were said in great booming voices and words echoed back but Deseem was too embarrassed to look up or notice. Ninee, thankfully, allowed him to retreat into his own thoughts and didn't try to explain the rite. He needed the time to compose himself and to reassure himself. It was okay, Liam was right within sight, he'd noticed he was there, he'd nodded in a small comforting manner, he wasn't going to be beaten for being almost naked around so many fully naked people. It would be okay, or so he kept telling himself, eyes down and the ritual went on around him.

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Chapter Forty Nine

What he heard and processed sounded vaguely like any group of religious people. If the rite seemed a little short, Deseem couldn't blame them for that. They were naked after all, standing on a cold stone floor, and naked, very very naked. The spoken words of the priest in the front ended and there was the shuffling of movement around him. It took a happy murmur from the crowd for him to risk looking up.

Once the shock of so much bare flesh faded a touch Deseem saw that the group was kissing. Not the group, he corrected his thoughts, the group was passing a kiss. It went from person to person, row to row. Always on the lips, often closed mouthed and friendly with smiles lingering after and occasionally a gentle hug, some kissed deeper, more sensually and drew softly teasing sounds of approval from the crowd. He watched in spite of his modesty, knowing he was blushing.

The kiss took a while to reach the front and at the end of the row nearest them the woman on the end stepped away and came over to kiss Ninee. It was quick and friendly but didn't linger. She glanced to Deseem, saw the wide eyed shock bordering on horror and gently skipped him. The kiss she gave the woman at the start of the front row was not so quick and quite a bit more than friendly but didn't linger too long. She stepped softly back to stand beside Deseem.

"It's a sign of our union, of our oaths to love one another. None of us are married to an individual, we are married to our gods and by such married to all. Some live in smaller family units, some of us live alone." She explained softly to Deseem but wasn't surprised that his eyes kept watch on the line of the kiss.

Deseem barely heard her because the kiss had reached the end of the front row and a very pretty young woman stepped forward. Honey blonde hair spilled around her shoulders and more than a few eyes watched as she moved almost demurely to the raised area and delicately stepped up. This wouldn't have mattered to him but she didn't move toward the priest but toward Liam.

Worse, Liam moved to meet her. She was short, far shorter than his willowy height, and she stood on tip toes while he leaned down. One hand gently cupped the side of her face and he accepted the kiss from her. It was neither chaste, friendly or quick. It knotted something unpleasant up in his stomach and he wanted to go smack the girl back into the line. Or, worse, smack Liam for lingering over the kiss until the crowd clapped and shouted in delight at the display.

The kiss ended, she curtsied a little and Liam nodded to the crowd, his face a little red with embarrassment but Deseem still wanted to smack him.

"It's required." Ninee explained softly beside him.

His eyes stayed on his husband, watching as Liam stepped over to the priest. This time it was Liam's face that was gently touched but the kiss he passed to the priest was no less passionate or personal. Oddly, it made him feel just as unhappy to see Liam kissing another man as it did to see him kissing a woman and he hadn't been expecting that.

"My Prince? It's required, Watcher Liam may do his part as Prince and in direct line to the throne by passing on the oath and love of our kiss but he's blushing like a virgin. He does it from obligation and duty. He's a private man, it's why he's only received our blessing twice since he's come of age."

The reassuring words did little to settle the unhappy feeling that ate at Deseem. Even after the kiss with the priest ended and the man moved to press his lips to the lips of the smooth, white carved stone statues of a man and woman, naked and locked in an embrace he still felt uneasy. Liam glanced across the room and Deseem thought his knees would give out, the eyes were like ice, challenging, distant and totally unfathomable. The surprising thing was, that look given to him and him alone, made Deseem feel less sick.

The formality of the ritual seemed to have been broken. The priest clapped Liam on the shoulder in a friendly way and they stepped down from the slightly raised section. People broke apart into groups of conversations, some returned to kissing. The fabric around the walls was pulled back to show open doorways into other rooms and the smell of rich warm foods drifted out. Deseem wasn't listening to whatever the priestess was trying to tell him, his eyes were locked on Liam.

Liam nodded to a few people that tried to stop and talk to him but he kept moving as soon as they'd stepped onto the main floor. Deseem didn't mean to stare but it was difficult not to. Liam was all pale skin and white hair, long legs and long arms and strength that always surprised him to see. It made his chest feel a little tight. It seemed okay to openly stare and study his husband when catching the man changing clothes or showering didn't. When he was almost to where Deseem stood to the side, waiting, someone stopped him and Liam paused, taking a moment to share words with a white haired woman that was old enough to be his grandmother. Out of respect to her age, he didn't brush past her but stood and listened, turning his back half to Deseem and nodding.

He was close enough that when the white hair tumbled apart, Deseem found himself fascinated by the strength in his husband's back. More so, he saw for the first time the faded, thin scars that crossed the pale skin. He knew how those scars had gotten there and more, but he'd never looked before. The other marks were gone, he knew that from having studied his husband's chest and stomach but he'd never had an easy chance to notice such subtle, lingering marks on the man's back.

Ninee was surprised the Deseem kept his eyes raised, especially given the increased level of intimacy going on around them. She was, at least, until she followed the direction of his eyes and caught him studying Liam. "War wounds, he doesn't speak of them. Rumor says he had the Healers leave those marks as a reminder but they've faded on their own." She volunteered knowing from how he watched that Deseem hadn't seen them before and knowing he'd never ask.

"Hm." Was all Deseem could answer and he dropped his eyes, embarrassed at having been caught staring and for knowing so little about his husband. He spun the ring on his finger and tried to pretend he wasn't almost butt naked.

"Deseem?" Liam said gently as he stepped closer.

That popped his head up, he hadn't heard Liam step closer. He was used to listening for the man's boots but Liam was barefoot and his movement was lost in the general noise of so many other people. "Husband." The word escaped him and sounded almost desperate.

"Are you well?" Liam asked carefully.

"I am well, my husband."

Without thinking about being so undressed or being watched by every set of eyes in the room, Liam reached out and brushed a stray lock of hair back from Deseem's face. "Walk around, take your time, get something to drink. I will find you when I'm done. Okay?"

Deseem nodded and dropped his eyes only they caught on the way white hair danced about Liam's waist.

"Don't worry, I will escort him." Ninee promised again because Liam was lingering and the group for the blessing was waiting for him.

"Thank you." Liam answered and with a final lingering look at Deseem moved to leave.

"If it pleases you? Would you like a drink, my Prince?" She asked when Deseem dropped his eyes down again. It wouldn't be long until the room they were in was dimmed down to intimate lighting and cushions and pillows were brought out so groups could sit and talk, or touch, in the open space. The group would already be spilling out into the small honeycomb of other rooms and areas and it was only a matter of time before the sexuality Deseem was so openly embarrassed by would find them.

"Please." Deseem nodded. He wasn't thirsty but he desperately wanted something to do other than standing there like a fool.

Ninee knew to get them moving and she led Deseem toward the side room with food and large glass bowls of punch. People were watching but when one of the elders poured them drinks and brought the metal cups over with a bright welcoming smile it earned a shy uneasy smile back from Deseem. That broke the ice and as they stood near the table, sipping the cool drink, people drifted over to them. She translated but most of the questions were very casual, simple words of greeting and welcome, concerns about his adjustment to their kingdom and anything that approached a suggestion she carefully turned aside.

When Deseem was able to answer and look at the person instead of trying to look anywhere but where he might see naked skin she smiled. "My Prince? Should we walk?"

"Walk?" He was just starting to be comfortable in the pool of light near the refreshment table and suddenly the dimmer further rooms that soft sounds and laughter drifted from felt frightening.

"So you may observe? There will be things to see now. We can walk along the hallways."

It was why he was here but he suddenly felt he'd seen enough.

"It will be well. If you feel overwhelmed we can return to the dressing room at any time."

He hated that his fear and unease must have been so easy to read. "Thank you." He nodded. "I will follow."

She led them around the room they were in a little bit and nodded seriously back to the playful smiles tossed their way from groups cuddling and talking. Deseem's modesty and uncertainty made most of them want to take the young man by the hand and educate him. Everyone had been spoken to prior about not touching the young prince without express permission but none of them had been prepared for how underfed and skittish he was. That simply made them want to fold him up in a blanket and make him feel better.

There wasn't much in the room beyond simple kiss and light touch, those interested in more tended to wander to smaller rooms. She waited until Deseem was able to glance around with more ease. He was still blushing but he was now able to openly watch. It may have been a growing sense of comfort or the wine in the punch but she was grateful for it and moved them down a hallway. They paused by the wide doorways and she stayed silent. Fortunately, beyond a few welcoming smiles, no one else spoke to them and it let them move around almost like shades haunting the hallways.

After several rooms and several combinations of pairings, Ninee dared to speak. "If you've any questions, my Prince..."

He felt light headed and wanted to go home. He couldn't because Liam was busy, somewhere, private with people, doing who knew what. The memory of the passed kiss returned and he felt himself frowning. Part of him didn't want to know, part of him needed to know. "My husband...."

"Yes?"

"Is he...I..." He couldn't quite ask.

"I will show you, come...they will be finished shortly anyway." She nodded, understanding and quickly moved them down hallways. They no longer lingered or paused to glance into softly lit rooms filled with pleasure and moans. The doorway she led them to was smaller, plainly made and led to a simpler hallway that felt older.

It made him uneasy to leave the security of the crowd but Deseem had been told the woman would be his guide. They didn't go far, down the unadorned hallway to a darkened section that was lit only by light slipping in from a crevice shoulder high on the wall. It was to this crevice that she led them and once in front of the long slit she simply nodded to it.

Deseem stepped forward, carefully, unsure he wanted to see what was on the other side. The light and soft chanting sounds drew him closer. He peered into the space and had to look down. On the other side of the wall and below them a little was a tiled room in white with small red and green tiles intermixed. It surrounded a rough rock wall where water poured in a small fall from high into a pool.

Six people moved around the room, naked, hair loose, three men and three women, each held a small pitcher but Deseem's eyes went to Liam, kneeling in the center of the room. His arms were outstretched, in one hand he held a round red bowl and in the other a white rod like short staff. His head was bowed and he knelt unmoving. His hair was wet and glossy, stuck to his skin with a shiny sheen.

As Deseem watched one of the priests moved toward the spring and lifted the urn he was holding as the group continued their chanted prayers. When whatever blessing was being said was finished. The priest moved to where Liam was kneeling and slowly poured out, not water, but some sort of oil. It slipped down in slick rivers across white hair and pale skin and Deseem felt his breath go short.

The last drops fell from the pitcher but the priest kept it hung there for a few seconds longer. Deseem could see the muscles in his husband's back trembling a little and it was clear he'd held the posture for quite a while. It made him acutely aware of his own body, the floor below his feet, the feel of the air in the hallway cool against his chest. Even the feel of the bracelets on his wrists and ankles felt like a small caress. He watched as Liam was directed to stand and led, head still bowed, to the pool of water.

Water mixed with the oil coating his husband was nearly more than he could stand. He knew the tingling, tight feeling fluttering in his stomach and knew he was going to embarrass himself. Liam had his arms held from his body, oil and water slicked over his body and his eyes were firmly shut. When he opened his eyes, Deseem had to grip the edge of the opening he was peering through to keep from being lightheaded.

"My Prince?" Ninee whispered. "He'll be finished shortly and will shower in another room." Below them the bowl and rod were removed from Liam's hand and with his hands free he helped to wash some of the oil from his skin before letting the priests help him step from the water. There would be a risk of slipping and falling until soap could remove the oil.

Deseem nodded and was glad to be lead away. She didn't take them back down hallways filled with rooms where bodies writhed and happy moans and whispers echoed. Instead she took him back out of the more closed off private feeling areas and back to what felt like more public spaces. Public or not, she didn't redress and took him right back to the room he'd changed in originally.

"Would you like an attendant, my Prince?"

Deseem shook his head.

"Very well. Watcher Liam will be right with you. Thank you for allowing us this honor." She bowed respectfully and left the small room.

He needed the solitude and stood in the center of the room, unmoving, trying to catch his breath. When the door opened he startled a little bit it wasn't a stranger. Liam was still wet, a towel wrapped around his shoulders and one about his waist that he used a hand to hold in place. He smiled at seeing Deseem.

"Husband." Deseem breathed with relief.

"I wanted to make sure you were alright before I dressed." He held out a hand. "They cover you with oil, I've already showered once and am going to have to again when we get home."

"I am well. Thank you, my husband."

Liam lingered in the room, trying to stare at Deseem and trying not to. The boy was still too skinny but the sight of all that dusky skin accented by gold and the wrapped white cloth made him glad he had a towel to hide behind. "I'll just be a moment, dress and we'll go home."

"Yes, husband." He nodded.

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Chapter Fifty

It was only that he was getting cold that made Liam turn and leave. If Deseem was anyone else, the small space could easily become witness to a smaller, more private rite of pleasure but he had no right to make advances on Deseem simply because the boy was so attractive. He didn't have far to escape to finish drying off and change clothes, Ninee had set his things in the room across the hall and the woman was waiting for him.

"Thank you Ninee."

"You're welcome."

He found his uniform laid out over a table waiting for him and he started to towel his skin off. "Will you tell me what you think?"

"Shouldn't you ask the young Prince that?"

"I will, but he is still often shy with sharing anything personal and I value your insight." And he was dying to know.

She thought about it before she nodded. "Very well. This was an intensely uncomfortable situation for him, but he didn't back down. I eased him into things, and made sure he saw many combinations, many ages, men with men, woman with men, women with women, groups both small and large."

"And?" He couldn't look at her and wasn't sure what news he was hoping to hear.

"And the only response to any of it was embarrassment and an almost clinical curiosity."

His fingers stopped buttoning up his pants and he turned to see if she was teasing him. "He found nothing even the slightest bit sexually interesting?"

"I wouldn't quite say that. He didn't respond to any of us, but I took him to observe you and the reaction was unmistakable."

"Now you're just being mean to me."

"I am not. The only thing he was moved by was seeing you with oil all over yourself. Not that I can blame him."

"But is he kree?"

"Do you need a label for him?"

"Yes! I do! I..." He drew a long slow breath and snatched after his control. "I do. He's never had the luxury of any of this, he needs to find what he desires."

"I believe he has and it's you."

"He thinks he has to, he thinks he's supposed to be a good wife."

"Liam, I am not trying to be cruel. I am good at what I do. Was I not the one to recommend Dorena for your first marriage, knowing her husband Norlan, knowing how well the three of you would find comfort together?"

"Yes."

"Even before you knew yourself quite what you desired."

"Yes, you did and I am grateful for such a match." He would have been friends with any of the female Shamans selected for the treaty marriage but he doubted he would have loved them so deeply. It was Ninee and her order's recommendation of which of the half dozen or so that made his family select Dorena.

"Sometimes, fate or God or destiny brings us such a match without further meddling. Liam, he is a good match to you and he is deeply attracted to you. Other men? Perhaps one day. Other women? Perhaps one day. The important thing is no matter where else he grows and finds an interest, he is rooted in his desire for you."

Liam shook his head.

"Perhaps he is the sort to be more interested in what is below the skin than a simple, singular type. It is rare, but the results are the same."

"I'm not so pure of heart, Ninee, I...look at him...he's beautiful...and still so innocent..."

"And you are fighting your own attraction to him."

"And knowing the only thing in all of this temple that sparked his interest was me? How am I to sleep beside him now?"

She raised her eyebrows. "Exhausted and sweaty from pleasure?"

"That is not helping!" He grumbled as he pulled his shirt on.

"You brought him here for him to learn what he desires. I showed him private and public, ages, genders, combinations, fetishes, nearly everything people can do together to find pleasure and he tried and watched but the only thing that made him tremble was seeing you."

Liam groaned.

"You've had lovers you've been simply friends with before. Why is this so different? Duty and destiny brought you two together, you are wed. You're a smart man, you can build a friendship with him and why shouldn't you two find pleasure together? Not all duty must be a burden."

He thought about the feel of Deseem in his arms, in the shower, touching himself while Liam encouraged him and there was no sense of duty or burden. "He's just...he's imprinted that I'm

someone safe to touch, that's all."

"Even those with trauma in their histories respond to what they desire. They may not act but they have a reaction. You wished to know, this is what happened. Denial does not suit you. Is this because he is Bastion?"

"I..." It wasn't, not really but it was so much more. Deseem was not his wife and he missed his wife horribly. He just couldn't bring himself to bond with a new spouse, he didn't even want to try.

"Stop thinking about it and just be his friend. If the two of you are attracted, on a physical level, to one another, allow yourself some pleasure. But just let it be and stop worrying about it." She scooped his gloves off the table as he stamped his feet down into the boots. "Let it be as it will be."

"Thank you." He said to the advice and the gloves. "I'm trying."

"Shall I escort you to your coach?"

"No, no need. I can find the way and you've missed enough of the rite already. Thank you, thank everyone."

She bowed a little. "It was our honor."

She'd left him with enough to think about and Liam didn't need any more encouragement. He was happy to escape back to the hallway and to the close by room that Deseem would be waiting. He was even happy to find Deseem dressed and ready, waiting for him to arrive.

"Husband." Deseem breathed a sigh of relief. "I want to go home."

Liam nodded. "Me too." He offered an ungloved hand toward Deseem and the boy needed no further encouragement. Deseem took his hand with comfortable ease and no hesitation as if they'd held each other's hand for years.

He guided them smoothly back out of the temple and down now empty hallways to the front of the building where their carriage was waiting. He nodded to the drivers and didn't wait for them to open the door. By the time they'd hopped down he'd already managed to hand Deseem inside and was climbing in after.

"We'd like to go home, please." Liam said as one of the men came to the door as he was pulling it shut behind him. When he heard their agreement he pulled it shut and let himself drop onto the coach seat. He opened his eyes and didn't find Deseem watching the city around them but staring at him. "Well, we survived."

Deseem licked his lips a little in nerves but kept his eyes boldly on his husband. It was the memory of Liam being kissed so openly, so passionately by others, men and women that urged him on. They had been direct, forward even and Liam seemed to respond to that and Deseem knew he wasn't that kind of man. It made him insecure but made him speak freely.

"I saw a great deal tonight." He started carefully.

Liam nodded. "I bet you did, I was far better educated than you are and still nearly keeled over from embarrassment my first visit."

"More variations of people than I could have dreamed existed. I saw...things...I never could have called up in fantasy. It felt immodest to look but I did because I know you wished for me to learn and I wished it too." He drew a careful breath but found he was unable to look away now. "I saw nothing I wished to be alone with until I saw my husband. Once I saw him, all I wished was

to be alone with him.”

The words were spoken so softly the sounds of the coach rolling across busy streets nearly swallowed them but they echoed across Liam’s world like the peal of a bell. It was the golden eyes watching him with such unreadable depths that made him shiver. It was like some restraint had been pulled away and before Liam knew what he was doing he was surging across the coach, hands cupping the sides of Deseem’s face, kissing the man.

Deseem flinched a little but it was only at the sudden movement. Anyone else surging toward him would be followed by violence and pain and his instinct was to pull away and protect himself. When all that happened was Liam’s lips finding his own and hungry kisses instead of angry blows he stopped pulling away. Hands cupped his face and held him still but they weren’t needed. Somehow Deseem managed to slip back so he was half reclining, head tucked into the corner made by the back and side of the coach. Liam followed and hovered over him, one long, black clad leg slipping between Deseem’s own. Liam’s thigh raised higher, finding and rubbing lightly into Deseem’s groin as the kiss deepened and Deseem suddenly learned the value of wearing pants. He liked the feel of one of his husband’s legs tangled around his own.

Liam broke the kiss and pulled away enough to really look at Deseem. The golden eyes took a moment to open, the lips remained parted and he struggled for control. The coach rocked on the cobblestone pattern streets and he wished again that they’d been made smooth because sliding along Deseem’s body with the gentle rocking wasn’t helping.

“I’m sorry.” Liam whispered but it was in Trade and he doubted Deseem understood. He didn’t want to but he pulled away, trying to return to his own side of the coach without stepping on or pinching anything on his husband.

Hands caught him, on a shoulder, an arm, and slipped higher. One settled on the side of his neck with long fingers curled around to the back of his head and the other fisted into a handful of damp white hair that had spilled everywhere. Liam froze, unsure, but when the hands tugged at him he allowed himself to be drawn back down. When he relented to the uncertain touch it was like giving unspoken permission and Deseem surged upward to claim his own kiss.

It wasn’t as demanding as Liam’s but the boldness from the normally shy and timid man made Liam tremble. He wanted to let Deseem control the kiss, he truly did, but it was too much and not nearly enough. Without thinking, he found himself taking the kiss over and pushing back down to rub their bodies together and half lay Deseem below him.

For once he found the glass windows an annoyance. There was something to be said for the boxy closed off coaches with no windows or tiny little ones. It was dark out but Liam knew his hair often shined like a beacon in the night. He tried to break the kiss and move away enough to pull the curtains but Deseem clutched at him, moaned a little in protest and kept kissing him. Liam juggled returning the nipping, hungry kisses with reaching out to find the edge of the fabric and pull it over the nearest windows.

“Mm...Deseem...curtains...” He managed to get out between kisses and with a protesting whine Deseem let go of his hair and neck. Liam swung a hand out across the coach and with a quick motion pulled the other curtain.

Deseem lay where he’d been left, half reclined, legs and lips parted. The low light made seeing him more difficult. There were lamps inside the coach but Liam left them dark. He needed the dim light to hide in, to forget that maybe molesting his husband might not be the best of ideas. Deseem was like a siren song, beautiful, close at hand, responsive, wanting, needing, craving as much as Liam did and that just didn’t feel right.

Not that he was able to refuse. Not when Deseem was reaching for him and trying in his inexperienced, clumsy way to please them both. It was just physical he told himself, just

attraction and desire. They were both young and sanctioned by several faiths and a treaty to share their bodies. It was okay to let Deseem's hands slip through his hair and let his lips nibble uncertainly at his own. He wasn't even really aware that his hands were pulling at Deseem's clothing until his fingers touched bare skin and they both gasped in surprise.

"You're so beautiful..." Liam whispered not caring the words were in Trade and Deseem arched under him pleased with his voice alone. "Touch me...touch me, Deseem...please..." Liam whispered in a soft begging tone.

"Husband?" Deseem answered back in the darkness, panting for breath. He only knew a small handful of words in Trade and none of the ones Liam was saying made any sense.

Liam groaned and forced himself to speak in Bastion. "Touch me...please...Deseem..."

"Oh...yes..."

Hands settled on his body and Liam fought the urge to strip away his uniform just to be able to feel those shy hands on his skin. There was no time for that, they'd have to be presentable once the coach stopped and he knew if he felt that touch on his skin he'd want it for hours. For now he'd have to settle for such a soft touch, so far from his skin, as the hands slipped over his chest and back, over his arms and shoulders. They wandered up to tease in his hair and caught on the metal of the crown he never wore.

Liam groaned. "Touch me..." He whispered and caught one of the wandering hands. The gold bracelets rang with a metallic clink as he lowered the hand and boldly pressed the uncertain fingers to his groin. He was already hard but the feel of that timid hand against him made him moan. "Please..."

In the dark, it took a moment for Deseem to really understand what was below his hand. His mind was too distracted to think quickly but when he understood his first reaction was to pull his hand away. It was wrong and immodest and so much more and he knew he shouldn't be so bold. Only, it felt good and Liam moaned and shivered against his hand. Deseem let the darkness claim his modesty and he kept his hand where it had been placed, he just wasn't sure what to do next.

Until one of Liam's kisses proved too wonderful, too perfect and Deseem curled his hand a little in a small, desperate need to cling to something and forgot what was under his hand. Even with the fabric, his fingers curved a little around the hidden length. He was surprised by the hardness and the heat and surprised by how good it felt to trace the shape. Lost in the kiss, he pressed his hand to Liam's manhood and rubbed it a little.

"Oh!....oh Lady bless....Deseem...." Liam moaned in Trade and pulled the younger man closer.

That was okay with him, Deseem wanted to be pressed against his husband, caught inside his husband's arms. What surprised him was how powerful he felt being able to elicit such a reaction from his very controlled husband. He may not have understood what his husband was moaning but he understood the tone in his voice.

Any thought to trying to perfect his talent at teasing his husband melted when a hand not his own pressed to his own length. The fabric may as well not have been there, the touch felt scalding hot good and Deseem cried out, loudly.

Liam moved to kiss Deseem's lips and stall the very loud moan. He wasn't sure it was loud enough to carry to the drivers or not but he didn't want to risk it. "There's....there's not much time..." Liam whispered. He could tell by the feel of the streets and the slight incline that they were getting close to the wall. His fingers fumbled at the opening to Deseem's pants but the coach kept rocking and moving them and Deseem kept writhing under his touch.

He might have managed it with one hand, Liam had experience in such matters where time was short and desire was strong, but the hand rubbing at his cock stopped and moved higher, trying to open his pants. Deseem's fingers were clumsy but far bolder than he'd ever expected them to be. Liam surrendered his own fight to get into his husband's pants and moved to undo his own.

Deseem's hand hovered just at the opening, suddenly shy once more and uncertain. Liam wanted to take that hand and slip it inside the fabric, encourage the gentle fingers to curl around his length but he didn't. It was a huge step to take and it was one Deseem would have to take on his own. Besides, he had more important things, like getting Deseem's pants open, to worry about.

The fabric finally parted and he didn't pause. His hand slipped inside and found its target without shyness. Liam needed to touch Deseem, to take him in hand as he had on their wedding night. That was a thought he didn't need because it called to mind other things they'd done on their wedding night, things they couldn't do now. Things he wanted to do when Deseem made a soft whimpering needy sound from just being touched.

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Chapter Fifty One

It felt too good and Deseem forgot to be shy. His fingers slipped into the parted black fabric and along smooth bared skin. Down they went, seeking in awkward inexperience for the source of so much fiery heat. When he found Liam's length it was hard and throbbing, slick and damp with desire and fit perfectly into his hand. He curled his fingers around the hardness and liked how the simple touch to such a private place made Liam shiver and moan in a dark, hungry way.

He wanted to stroke and tease as he was being stroked and teased but Deseem found it difficult to do anything complicated. His mind refused to focus and he felt uncoordinated and clumsy in his own lust. All that mattered was Liam, being kissed by Liam, being touched by Liam and how each shivering contact tumbled him closer to his own release. It didn't matter that he wanted the same for his husband, he simply lacked the skill to feel so much and think at the same time. He hadn't the experience to do much of anything without actively thinking about it.

It was enough for Liam. Tension, suppressed desire and prolonged celibacy had turned him into an easily pleased creature. Deseem kissing him back would almost have been enough alone. Being able to touch all that richly golden skin would have easily satisfied him, even having those tentatively wanting hands exploring him would have pleased him. It was only in his lustiest fantasies had Liam imagined Deseem being bold enough to touch him and even that thought had shied away from Deseem's fingers actually curled around his manhood.

Every twitch of the younger man's fingers, every bump from the road that caused the slender

hand to slip against his flesh made things worse. It was a delicious torment and one Liam didn't want to fight against. "That's it..." he whispered in Trade against Deseem's lips. "Oh Deseem..." He felt the carriage slow as it approached the wall and the guards at the entrance. They wouldn't look inside with the curtains drawn but they would stop. After that it was only a short, very short, trip to the garden they'd be dropped off in.

The horses lurched a little and their bodies rocked together. Deseem cried out again, muffled around a kiss, shocked by the sudden motion. It tipped him over the edge. His own hand tightened around Liam's cock as his body writhed and curled up, caught in his trembling release. As he panted to catch his breath, shivered in the echoes of his pleasure, he tried to remember how many times he'd worn pants since he'd wed and how many of those times ended up with his husband's hand inside his pants. His brain was too exhausted to think clearly enough but it did seem quite often and as he lazily stretched his body along Liam's he wondered if he should wear pants more often.

It was only as Liam's hand slipped from inside the fabric of his pants did Deseem notice that while he was sighing and panting in pleasure, he'd also been lightly, teasingly, stroking his husband's own length. It was mindless, like petting Baxter's head when he was upset and trying to calm down, and oddly felt good in an entirely different way. It hadn't occurred to him how teasing and horrible it would feel to be so tormented but it wasn't difficult to imagine. He expected Liam to pull his ineffectual hand away and stroke himself, pleasure himself, since Deseem seemed incapable of it.

Only the hand slipped into the black fabric and didn't pull his fingers from their resting place. Instead they closed partially around them, sticky and hot and strong. Interwoven with Liam's own hand, he felt his touch growing stronger, rougher, less shy. His strokes were taken from teasing to demanding and with it Liam shivered and sighed against him. His husband wasn't pushing him away or scolding him for not understanding or being skilled, he was showing him how, including him in his own pleasure. Deseem found he liked that and liked being languidly pinned below his husband's still tense and hungry body. Mindlessly he mimicked what his husband's hand was doing as he placed hungry soft kisses across the far too pale face and neck.

It didn't take much until Liam grew tense, rigid and silent, not even breathing as he balanced on the edge of release. It was an impossible balance and he fell from it with gasping breaths against Deseem's ear and a short, quiet, whimpered moan. Deseem found he liked feeling his husband find pleasure, liked it quite a bit. Not just in the vibrations or release in the hard flesh below his grip but also in the shivering waves that swept through the tall, slender body. He liked being part of the cause of something so wonderful and knowing he'd given his husband something that felt so good.

"Oh....oh Deseem..." Liam sighed and found himself wanting to cuddle and nuzzle at the younger man but the back of a coach wasn't a place to do that. The last thing he wanted was for them to stop and have the coachman catch them with both their hands down his pants. "We're nearly home." He whispered and felt Deseem shiver.

Only as he lifted a little from Deseem he had to pause to steal another kiss. The lips he found more skilled now, relaxed and pliant, welcoming in a way that surprised him from the timid boy. If they were alone, in a soft bed, with the whole of the night before them, that kiss would have stirred Liam to go further, do more, so drunk was he on the pleasure they'd shared.

Instead he sighed and withdrew. Their hands still almost entwined as they slipped from the sheltering fabric. With his free hand he slipped out his handkerchief and gracefully tried to clean up both their hands and praying they hadn't made too much of a mess of themselves in the tight, confined space. With a bit more time he could call magic and clean fabric and had in the past but they had only a few scant moments and black showed everything.

"Husband?" Deseem asked softly. His hand had been delicately cleaned but Liam hadn't said

anything.

Liam glanced up and found himself grinning a little at how relaxed and at ease his husband looked, his braided hair spilled around his shoulders and his clothes still in disarray. "We still must walk to our rooms."

He'd forgotten about that and his eyes went wide. "Oh, yes, I'm sorry my husband, we...I...shouldn't have...I..."

"Maybe we shouldn't have but I won't say that." He leaned in again and kissed the now worried mouth. "We have to get you home so you can get a good night's sleep. Tomorrow is a big day, or have you forgotten?"

Deseem shook his head. "No, my husband." He watched as Liam leaned back in the small space and tried to straighten his uniform while checking his appearance. Deseem took that as his cue to redress as well but he felt no rushed hurry to return to their day to day distance.

"Still want to go through with it?" Part of Liam hoped the young man would change his mind.

"If my husband still will allow it."

The formality after such a moment of wild passion made Liam's heart hurt a little. He was glad when the coach slowed and they both had to focus on the final straightening of cloth and hair. It was from a simple desire to avoid the coach drivers' knowing eyes that had him opening the door and hopping out. Deseem followed with more confidence and Liam tried to see if casual eyes could tell and the only sign he saw was the lines on the side of Deseem's eyes were smeared from his touch.

"Thank you." Liam called to the coachmen before they could hop down and turned to guide Deseem home, leaving their respectful greeting behind them. It was silly to feel guilty for finding physical pleasure with his husband but he did and he wasn't prepared for knowing looks.

It was a silent, dark walk back to their rooms in the mid fall chill air. Deseem was unwilling to speak when his husband was obviously lost in thought. He followed beside the taller man, his white hair a shocking glow in the silvery moonlight. If Liam had rethought the bold statement that it would be Deseem alone that made the choice to continue with the Healing tomorrow he would accept it but he would be disappointed. Any amount of pain was worth the chance to be whole again, or even as whole as he could become.

Liam held the door to their rooms open but Deseem paused. "Thank you for keeping me warm, husband." He spoke softly, acknowledging the thin layer of warmed air that had appeared around his body as they'd walked through the cold night.

"Huh?" Liam blinked and came up from his thoughts and sure enough he'd just included Deseem without having to think about it. "Oh, you're welcome. Heya Baxter boy!" The dog had peeked his head carefully into the bedroom to see if the intruders were friend or foe but when he saw it was them he came over as a large bundle of wiggling fur covered happiness. It didn't miss Liam's notice that while Deseem greeted the dog, he was thinking something serious and didn't smile as brightly as he normally did with Baxter rubbing and pushing against their legs. "I'll take him out." Liam offered and clapped his hands to get the dog to pay attention and obey.

Liam paused in the doorway as the dog leapt out in front of him. "The choice is still yours Deseem." Amber gold eyes met his and Liam felt a little lost in their serious, overly grateful depths. He nodded. "We'll be back in a little while, going to let him romp a bit." It was an easy lie, one cloaked in truth, but he was the one that needed the time alone in the cool night air.

A light knock came on the door as it opened and Liam sat up expecting more Healers and Soulhealers and surprised to find his sister in law slipping into the room. "Bekka?"

"May I join you?" She asked softly, barely above a whisper out of respect to the young man tucked under the covers of the bed.

Liam snapped to his feet respectfully. "Of course, please." At her smile he moved to snag the only other chair in the room and bring it closer to where he'd pulled his own. "Please..." He waved to the chair and stayed standing as she moved into the room and sat down.

"I hope I'm not intruding, Lach wanted to come over himself but he's stuck in meetings until after dinner."

Liam nodded and sat down. "It's kind of you to come. I cancelled my classes today, felt someone should sit with him."

Bekka reached over and took her brother in laws hand in her own. "Someone should sit with you as well. How is he?"

The hand in his own surprised him and it took a moment to relax enough to curl his fingers around hers. "Jas says it went well but she's not happy. It's counter to their way to cause so much damage and pain to heal. He looks too young."

"He's not much younger than you, you old man." She teased. "Things are better between you two?"

Liam nodded. "I'm trying not to be such an ass to him. Poor boy's had nothing but pain and trouble his whole life last thing he needs is to be bound to me."

"Oh hush, you like to play the grump but you're as big a sweetie as Baxter is."

The dog was snoring in the corner but Liam had seen him in a fight, flecked in blood, snarling death and he wondered if Bekka meant more than she'd said. "Why aren't you afraid of me?"

Bekka's friendly smile fled and she glanced to the younger man with a stunned look. "You're as direct as your brother."

"A trait mother expected of us. Most everyone else is, why aren't you?"

She shrugged. "Lach isn't and I trust my husband and really, should I be afraid of you?"

"You aren't very Talented."

"Nope, barely a touch of it but really, what are you going to do? If Malcome hasn't driven you to tear down the palace in frustration by this point I doubt you'll do it now. Really, the Guardians wouldn't be so welcoming toward you if you were likely boil me alive."

That made him laugh a little but it had a nervous tinge to it.

"It was war, Liam." Her voice went suddenly serious. "Your orders were to do what you could, horrible and awful as those things were. How long will you punish yourself for that? The very fact that you could be so kind to poor Deseem, a stranger from Bastion, shows you're a good man."

"Lach didn't tell you." He always assumed nearly everything he told his brother would be told to Bekka. The two were solidly a partnership and he'd never ask Lach to hide things from his wife.

"I'm married to the Captain of the Watchers and second in line to the throne. Your brother has his secrets and he would never tell me any of them, especially those about his baby brother. More, I'd not ask him."

Which left him the choice to tell her or not. Deseem was ashen on the bed, a line of worry or pain between his eyes even in the deep sleep the Healers had put him in. They'd only seen the boy as he was, broken, lost, tossed into a new culture but he'd done something unbelievably risky and brave.

"I'm not the good man you think. I owe Deseem my life and more." It was such a risk to tell anyone. He struggled to speak of the time to Jas and he knew she'd not scorn him for it but Deseem needed allies and Bekka would be a strong one. Slowly, he picked his words out carefully and told his sister in law the story of his capture and Deseem's mercy.

"I wish we could have met before the war." Bekka answered when Liam's words stuttered to an end. "Maybe you'd believe me more when I say you are a good man."

He didn't believe her for a moment but he forced a quick smile.

"You're too much the gentleman to contradict me but I can see it in your eyes. Do you think Dorena or Norlan would love you so deeply if you weren't a good man?"

"Before the war....Norlan hasn't written me since I wed."

"I'm sure there is a logical reason for it."

"I married someone from the kingdom that butchered our wife. I'm not sure I would be forgiving in his place. He loved her so much and I got her killed."

"War killed her, not you and from what I could tell of him when we met he's not the kind of man to misunderstand. He'll know why you two wed and should respect that."

"I should have gotten word."

She felt the way his hand shifted in hers, a subtle movement that betrayed his unease more than his face ever did. "How did the ritual go? Your poor brother blushes red from toes to head the whole time."

"I don't mind it that badly."

Her subtle hinting wasn't going to work so she moved to more direct methods. "And did Deseem learn whatever it was that you two felt he should learn?"

Liam's head swung to look at her, his blue eyes startled and for once the cold cynical distance gone from his face. "What?"

"Oh, please, I'm not so naïve or sheltered. I know why you'd hurry over and volunteer. He has been cloistered and while your brother may not gossip about you we've both heard gossip and rumors of people you've been involved with. They haven't all been women, for as quiet as you might wish to keep your preferences. I'm not blind either, Deseem is strikingly handsome. And, you are far too honorable of a man to allow anyone into your bed who isn't fully aware and willing. So did you two learn what you wished to learn?" She tried to hide her pleased amusement at his surprise.

"I'm not sure. A lot will depend on how he is after he recovers from today. I wish he'd waited and let them do this slowly. I'm no good at sitting by bedsides helplessly."

She squeezed the tense hand. "I'll help take a turn and Lach too so you don't have to sit here alone. Celeste asked me to see if she could take a shift as well. Said that the poor thing was family now and Malcome can have a huff if he wants."

That made him chuckle a little.

"She also said the choice would be yours, if you'd rather she not come by..."

"The problems between Malcome and myself are of his making, not mine. I can't change what I am or make him fear me less."

"Good, it's settled. We'll help out until the poor thing is feeling better. Watcher Bishick and that student of his he's been sending over to give Deseem a bump in lessons want to help too. I've it all planned out. We'll always have someone here that can speak Bastion and he'll never be alone for a moment until he's feeling better. Jas says it's going to be days or more. You just don't worry about a thing."

"You planned it all already?"

"Of course! I knew you'd be sitting here brooding and silent all alone."

"Lach is a lucky man."

"Awww." She cooed and leaned over to press a kiss to the side of his face. "Let me go get us some tea and maybe a snack. I bet you haven't eaten all day."

He hadn't but also hadn't been hungry until the mention of food made his stomach growl. "Thank you, Bekka." If nothing else some of the worry of how to make sure Deseem wasn't left hurting and alone was resolved. He had a feeling the boy had spent far to much time hurt and alone already in his life.

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Story Home

Home

Snowflakes and Embers

Chapter Fifty Two

Awareness was a hazy thing for Deseem. He would drift up and hear voices, hushed and soft and they hurt. If he'd been able to think straight he would have wondered why he'd agreed to being hurt so badly again but his mind refused to focus on anything but how much pain he was in.

It never lasted long. As soon as he drifted awake gentle hands and a cool cloth soothed his face. A soft voice whispered to him in a gentle tone, sometimes he knew he should understand the words and sometimes he was aware that they were Trade. The sound of the voices barely drifted in to him and he was vaguely aware of them being male or female but was totally unable to focus on if he knew them or not.

After the soft touch and softer voices came warmth. The Healers he knew, they'd promised to keep him unconscious for the worst of it and as he drifted awake naturally they would come in and ease him back to sleep. He'd never minded the warm buzzy feeling of being Healed. It always meant wounds and pain fading and now was the same, he embraced their help with abandon.

He was caught now in the groggy feeling of having slept too much and while he couldn't swear to it, he was drifting up awake after shorter and shorter times. His body knew he wasn't sick, not really, only his head felt like it had been beaten with sticks and cut with knives. The only good thing was that each time he drifted awake a little more he was able to think around the pain a fraction better.

"This was a mistake." Deseem heard Liam say but the words were in Trade and he didn't understand.

"It was his choice. Jas says it went well." Another male voice whispered back and it sounded like his husband but wasn't. It took some painful thinking but Deseem guessed it was the brother, Lachlin, the one his husband said to trust in his stead.

"Every time he wakes up he's weeping in pain and moaning. I shouldn't have allowed him to do this."

"You honored what he wanted."

"Maybe I shouldn't have."

"You care about him."

There was a long pause before Deseem got to hear his husband's voice again. "I empathize with him. At least when I was isolated I had you, until you went out on patrol anyway. What they did to him was so cruel. Maybe he'll have a chance to be happy here..."

"That's what you're giving him."

"I shouldn't have let him do this."

The voice, so soft but still so rumbling, made Deseem feel better and when it drifted away again he felt sick to his stomach and in more pain. He waited but the two men didn't speak again and Deseem tried to open his eyes. The light was dim in the room but it still cut into his head like a dagger and he winced away from it.

"Husband?" He whispered out and heard surprised shuffling around him a moment before a warm, large, calloused hand slipped into his own.

"I'm here. Should I get a Healer? Are you in much pain?"

He wanted to shake his head but any movement made the throbbing worse. " 'm okay."

Liam's hands shifted and slipped away from holding his own only to reappear at the back of his head. Something cool touched his lips and his head was tilted forward a little. "Water, sip slowly."

He did as he was told and the lukewarm water made his throat and mouth feel better but his stomach didn't like the small drabbles. "How long?"

"About a day." Liam answered. "Little more, we were starting to worry."

Deseem forced his eyes to crack open and he raised a hand to trail fingers over the loose white hair that tumbled over Liam's shoulder. "You were worried."

"I was."

"I'm sorry."

"Shhh it's okay. What can I do to make you feel better?"

Deseem licked dry lips and felt his focus fading fast. "Read to me."

"What?" Liam glanced over his shoulder to his brother but Lach didn't seem willing to offer advice. "I don't have any books here..."

Deseem sighed. "Talk to me...don't have to understand just....I like hearing your voice."

Lach cleared his throat softly. "I'll go get some tea." His knowledge of Bastion was limited but the obvious intimacy of the moment didn't need to be spoken of in Trade.

The request was so simple but it made Liam feel uncomfortable. He didn't tend to speak much and never just for the sake of speaking. It took some thought to figure out what to say. "Well...when you're better, maybe this spring or summer, I'll see if I can get some leave time and we'll go to the coast. Up north the beach is filled with rocks and the water is always cold. The wind blows and makes your face sting with salt but it's beautiful. All sharp cliffs and tall trees..." He sighed as he remembered. "When you ride south you round the horn and the beaches grow softer, less rocky and the water starts to warm. Still gets a lot of rain and wind but you can swim in it and the further south you go toward the gulf the warmer the water. We lit a fire one night on the beach and slept behind the shelter of a washed up log, with all the stars above and the sound of the surf crashing behind us." And a guardsman lover of his sleeping behind him on their day off, the man's roughened hands slipping under his uniform, easing his pants down, slowly taking him. He didn't tell Deseem that part but even if he had it wouldn't have mattered, his husband had drifted back to sleep while he'd talked.

As a child, Lach had never knocked to request permission to enter Liam's room. His brother had always had an open door for family and the few friends he did have. That had changed once his magic had opened and so many people had withdrawn from even casual contact with him but Lach had continued to be given such open permission.

He knocked now. Not because Liam had asked him to or because he wasn't welcome but because Deseem needed to control his own space. It wasn't something either of them had asked him to do but Lach just knew. Deseem needed the privacy and space to recover and grow in and that needed to be respected. He quietly passed the word along to any one else that might feel it was okay to just walk in and he'd crossed his fingers that they'd listen.

He stood in the hallway for a long moment but before he needed to knock again the door cracked open and golden eyes peered out. "Good Afternoon, Deseem."

The door opened more and a shy smile darted across the otherwise serious face. "In, in, brother, in..."

Lach hadn't been by in a few days but even in that short time Deseem's coloring was vastly improved. He'd stayed at Healer's Hall for two days and been abed at home for several more days but once he wasn't nearly crippled by headaches he'd gone back to his day to day life. No amount of protest from Lach or Liam could change that, Deseem simply shook his head and said he felt well but both brothers were uncertain. Deseem's coloring was bad, his face looked gaunt, he looked fragile. It had been Liam that finally nodded and made it clear that Deseem would do what he felt like doing and they weren't going to wrap the boy up in cotton and protect him.

He'd asked Liam to resume his lessons a week after, even though he still wasn't well and still looked awful. Against Lach's advice, Liam had agreed. Lach was a big enough man to admit he'd been wrong. The boy didn't overly strain himself and had absorbed more words in Trade in a week than he had in all the long weeks he'd been married.

"You look well." Lach glanced about the room but didn't see his brother. Baxter was sitting alertly beside Deseem's chair where the boy had obviously been seated. A blanket was rumpled on the seat and the dictionary that translated words between Trade and Bastion was carefully placed on top of it.

Deseem didn't answer he just smiled a little and shrugged.

That meant that Lach had just used words the boy didn't know and he tried again. "How are you feeling?"

The phrase was one Deseem knew. Everyone asked him that and he'd made Liam teach it to him. It annoyed him to hear the same patter of words over and over and not know their meaning. He nodded and answered with the reply he used for everyone. "Well..but..." He gestured to his head and winced.

"You're still recovering, it'll get better. You look healthier." He smiled because he knew he'd gone way beyond the boys understanding. The very fact that Deseem was willing to interact with him and, even more, meet his eyes, was a huge change. "It's okay, I don't expect you to understand."

"Sit...brother...sit..." Deseem moved to the chair that had been empty and patted it as he repeated his request, uncertain if he'd remembered the right word or said it clearly.

"I'm fine, thank you, I'm not staying."

"Sit, brother."

Lach kept from smirking because he knew Deseem didn't mean to sound like he was ordering Baxter around. More, he knew Deseem was trying to be a good host and Lach wasn't going to be a heel and rebuke him. "Very well." He took the offered chair but before he could ask about Liam the boy had scurried away to pour tea. Lach nodded and bowed a little as Deseem offered the cup with a small bow of his own. "Thank you."

"Welcome." Deseem moved to his chair but he didn't sit, instead he gathered up his blanket and folded it with perfect care.

"I'm looking for Liam, is he home?" Deseem stared back at him blankly. "Liam?" He held up the letter he'd brought over. "I've a letter for Liam?"

"Husband..." Deseem shook his head.

"He's not here."

Deseem shook his head again. "Husband..." He sighed and drew a square with his hands. "Room...book...ah..." He flittered off into Bastion when Lach showed no signs of understanding.

The words sounded very much like frustrated cursing and Lach turned the words he'd understood over in his mind trying to make sense of them. "Room...book..."

Deseem wasn't willing to wait for Lach to understand. He gathered up his book and began flipping pages.

"Oh, the library! Is Liam at the library?"

That made Deseem glance up and he nodded. "Library, yes." He frowned and when he spoke again it was more heavily accented because he was trying to repeat the words Liam had used without knowing their meaning yet. "Back soon, won't be gone long."

"Ah good, well..." He glanced around the room and tried to hide how awkward he suddenly felt. "I can come back later." Lach nodded and stood part way up.

"Brother, sit...sit..." Deseem fussed.

With a sigh Lach obeyed. He smiled and nodded and spoke in a very pleasant voice. "Horribly uncomfortable and awkward...yes I'd love to scurry away but I'm afraid I'll make you cry so thank you." He nodded a little.

Deseem studied the words but they made no sense until he heard the words of thank. The pleasant tone and nodding smiling man made it seem like he may have done something right so he smiled quickly in reply and sat down on the edge of his seat to wait for his husband to return.

Liam opened the door to his rooms as he felt the book slipping. "Deseem..." He called out and juggled the small stack of books back into his hands. "I'm back. I wish you'd have gone with me, I wasn't sure what to get...oh." His words in Bastion stopped as he glanced over and caught Lach hoping to his feet as Deseem hurried over to take the books from his arms.

"Lady Bless I'm glad you're home."

"Heya Lach." He glanced from Deseem to Lach and back. "He let you in and let you stay?"

"Let me in? He wouldn't let me leave. Said you'd be back and fussed when I tried to go."

"He...what?" Liam stood blinking in surprise as he watched his normally very meek husband carefully placing the stack of books into two piles, one for Trade and one for Bastion.

"Oh he didn't tie me down or anything but it was clear he wanted me to stay."

"He asserted himself?"

"Yup."

"With a stranger?"

"Well, I'm at least known to him..."

"Still....that's good...very good." The smile took over his face before Liam could stop it. "Deseem?" He switched languages with ease. "You let Lach in."

He stopped fussing with the books and came to face his husband. "Yes, my husband."

"You gave him tea and asked him to wait?"

"I tried, I'm not sure he understood anything I said. Was that proper? I'm sorry if I overstepped myself, my husband."

"No, no it's good." The smile grew wider and he shook his head. "It just surprised me, in a good way." He really didn't want to jump up and down and point while shouting about improvement and healing but that's what he felt like doing.

That made Deseem smile shyly in return. "I'm glad it pleased you, husband. With your permission? I'll take Baxter out so you and your brother may be alone."

"There's no need for that, it's okay."

Deseem glanced to the other man, the one that looked so very little like his husband. "He came to see you, I won't stay out in the chill long."

"If you wish, just bundle up, it's cold out there for you."

"I will, my husband." He tapped his leg in the small command and whistled a little. "Come on, Baxter, come on boy." He called and the dog who had been pretending to be bored and lazy scrambled to follow.

"Huh." Liam shook his head.

"You're still smiling." Lach carefully pointed out.

"Well... yes, I am. I'm not used to him thinking for himself. I've had to tell him almost everything or suggest it first. This is a nice change. Want me to heat your tea up?" He asked while he poured and heated his own cup.

"Sure. He's doing better? He looks better."

"He's sleeping through the nights again. Once the worst of the headaches faded he was waking up almost in a panic late at night but that's faded too. It's almost like someone swapped him with someone new and Jas says that'll only become more pronounced as he continues to heal."

"Someone new that you like?"

"Someone new that I can live with." Liam nodded and sat down, not letting his brother guide him down the conversational pathway of how close he may or may not be to his husband. "What brings you by?"

"Oh, yes, this arrived for you." The letter wasn't thick but he'd known the handwriting and waylaid the delivery.

Liam took it and written across the front was his full title, Watcher Prince Liam Corena Duke of Lars Down. He flipped it over and sure enough the wax was sealed with a dog's head emblem. "Norlan." He'd molded that seal from raw rock as a gift for the man. "I didn't think he was going to write me back. I haven't heard from him since, well, since I was on the coast."

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Chapter Fifty Three

"This wasn't his fault. The courier, apparently, is attempting to court and wed a farmer's daughter out by Thimastown and he'd lingered a bit too long the morning he was supposed to leave so he left in a rush. Anyway he'd gotten halfway to the drop point when it occurred to him he hadn't grabbed the dispatches and left them back with his farmer's daughter. Since he knew the area he took a short cut back to save time but there was no bridge, just a fallen tree. He tied off his horse and crossed it, ran back, got the dispatches. Only the rains had the creek flooded and they'd washed out the bank, the tree gave out, turned and pitched him in. He emerged sopping and wet but the bag floated quite a bit down stream. It's bespelled but didn't turn up and he kept the inventory of dispatches in the dispatch bag so we had no list of what was lost. Anyway, it turned up a week ago and the letters were distributed accordingly, just very late."

"That happens often?"

"On the casual letters? Not often but it has happened. Anything really important travels with a Watcher or the guard and they never get lost." Anything urgent was passed from mind to mind or sent directly between parties that had a bond. Lach had bonds with more Mindspeakers than he cared to think about and had been woken from a sound sleep on more than a few occasions with urgent news. "Are you going to open it?"

"I don't know."

Lach shifted in his seat. "You want to know what he said, right?"

"Maybe. If he's upset I'm not sure I want to know." He turned the letter over in his hands again. "Cowardly of me..."

"He's not going to be upset."

"I know." He drew a breath and broke the seal.

Lach sat and watched as his brother's blue eyes scanned the paper and the frown deepened. "What? What's he say?"

"He's..." Liam had to read the lines again. "He's coming here."

"What? When?"

"He's vague about that, before the first snows. Says he'll winter down here and go back when court goes north in the spring." Then it sunk in that this was about the time of the first snows in the mountains. "He's already on his way. He could be here any day."

"That's good, right? You haven't seen him in..."

"Not since." He nodded but neither of them wanted to say not since Liam had been a broken

damaged mess.

"But it'll be good to see him again, right?"

Liam nodded. "I just didn't expect this..." He sighed. "Which means he wants to see me before making up his mind about all of this. I don't need his permission to remarry but I am supposed to have gotten his blessing. There wasn't time."

"I'm sure he'll understand." Lach had found Norlan to be a very sensible man and had been happy to have him be almost a brother in law. Liam wasn't technically married to Norlan but Lach hadn't been blind to the relationship.

"I have to explain this to Deseem." Liam rubbed at his eyes and wondered how that conversation would go.

"You do want to see him again, don't you?"

"Of course. I have Dorena's belt to return to him. She made me promise..." He drew a breath and pushed down the nervous uneasy feeling that had settled into his stomach. "It'll be good to see him again." He meant it too, no matter how bittersweet it would be he did mean it.

"Good. I have to go, tonight's our night to have dinner at Court. Father's complaining that you may as well be off riding a patrol for all they see you, you should come to Court more." His brother's icy stare was enough of an answer and Lach found himself chuckling. "Or not... but still, go see our parents sometime. Take Deseem, father asks about him all the time and getting the boy out of these rooms would do him some good."

"I'm still trying to get him to the library."

"Library first, Court tomorrow." He stood up and placed his tea on the side table. "I'll have the gate guards keep an eye out for Norlan's arrival and try to give you at least a little advanced warning."

Liam thanked his brother and walked with him to the door back to the hallway. The thin letter that had carried so few lines so far was an unusually heavy weight in his hand. He took extra care to put it neatly on his desk before he moved to the bedroom garden doors. Out in the late afternoon sunlight, Deseem was throwing a stick and Baxter was eagerly chasing. The sun was weak, creeping into winter and fading early into cold night but it caught on the dark curls and dusky skin and Liam found himself eager to see how his husband looked against the white glow of freshly fallen snow.

It was a thought he had to shake his head to clear his mind of. He opened the door and relished the colder air. It wasn't something he could easily explain to other people, how the balance of hot and cold, moisture and wind, earth and life all felt like a perfectly balanced musical composition that only he could hear. The music always felt strongest as the seasons changed or when the weather was changing in a dramatic fashion. It pressed along his nerves and made him feel like one stray thought could cause his mind to go spinning off, lost forever in the patterns of the world around him.

Being home was eroding some of his cautious alertness. When his magic had first appeared, even before he had fully mastered it, he'd often get lost in the patterns all around him. War and the fear and forced awareness of everything had sharpened those senses from the raw beauty of things to what could keep him alive, what could warn him of danger. Riding his patrol had softened some of the sharp edge he'd gained but he still used those senses to scan everything for danger. Home was soothing that, reminding him of the sheer delight that made up the patterns in a tree and as he walked out into the cold air he knew he'd have to find a balance between the two extremes, somehow.

That was a worry for another day. Right now he had more pressing issues, responsibilities closer to home, then his own quest for balance. Deseem's progress was amazing. Everyday was unraveling more of the boy's fears and Liam was literally seeing him changing before his eyes. He was still very formal and he still fussed about the rooms looking for things to fix, scrub or straighten but the shy darting smiles were more common and their conversations were expanding.

Deseem took the stick from the waiting dog and tossed it as hard as he could. It sailed across the garden and disappeared behind a shrub, Baxter hot on it's trail. "Husband."

"Deseem."

"It's so cold!" He puffed his breath and grinned a little at the small white cloud that formed. "Look, I can make clouds."

Liam grinned again as Deseem puffed harder and made a larger plume of clouded breath. "I can make clouds too." He focused and pulled the moisture from around him, condensed it with perfect care and when he turned his hand over a small but quite fluffy cloud drifted from his palm.

Deseem cocked his head to the side and watched the small cloud fluff up and slowly drift away. "That's cheating."

"Cheating?"

"You have magic, that's cheating, I can make them without magic." He puffed again to prove his point.

"It takes Waterseeking and Windcalling to make a cloud you know."

Deseem raised an eyebrow but Baxter was back with his stick and he distracted himself with retrieving it and throwing it again as hard as he could.

"Not many people have that combination, you should be impressed."

"Was my husband trying to impress me?"

Golden eyes drifted sideways from where they were watching Baxter romp to study Liam and for the first time in years Liam felt like a flabbergasted child. "Maybe I was."

Deseem dropped his eyes. "Just being who he is, is enough for my husband to impress me." He dared to glance over again, with his face turned down submissively. There was fire blazing behind the ice blue eyes and he could tell just by how Liam was standing, the tension in his shoulders that the man was close to grabbing him. It was a look Deseem would have mistaken for anger and violence before and now he knew it was one of lust and passion. It was a look he'd very quickly grown to enjoy seeing.

Baxter saved them from any further awkwardness by barking at how rude it was that his stick wasn't instantly thrown again. "Brat." Liam muttered and scratched the dog's ears. "It is cold, won't snow though. Not for a while yet."

"I'm looking forward to seeing it."

"Speaking of seeing things..." Liam motioned to the door and it was Baxter that first bounded to go back in. "I've spoken to you about my wife's other husband, my friend Norlan?"

"Yes, my husband."

"Technically, by the Northern Clan's traditions, we have no bond to each other but it's considered respectful to ask permission of the other before remarrying. There wasn't time to do this when we wed but I wrote to Norlan and explained things to him."

"He has written you back?"

Liam nodded.

"He doesn't approve of you marrying one of your enemies."

"Oh, no...no he hasn't said that. He didn't say much of anything." He held the door open as Baxter scrambled in and Deseem followed. "He's planning on a visit. He's going to winter here with us."

"But it is already winter."

"Almost, yes, he's on his way. He could be here in a few days or weeks."

Liam may not have spoken over much about the man but Deseem would have to have been stupid not to notice how deeply his husband cared for him. The thought of meeting him, of having to gain his approval and blessing for their marriage, made his stomach churn. Liam would say it wouldn't matter but Deseem was no fool. If Norlan disapproved it would eat at his husband and Deseem would do anything to spare the man further grief.

"I will attempt to not disgrace you and be a good wi..." Deseem sighed and corrected himself. "A good spouse."

That wasn't a worry he'd had until Deseem brought it up. If Norlan was going to object it would be to the entire marriage but he could accept that and still dislike Deseem personally. It was unlikely but a possibility and Liam felt himself grow a little more uneasy. He wanted the people he cared about to like each other. Just like he'd needed Lach to like Norlan and Dorena, he found he needed them to like Deseem to. It was a touchy subject but it was easily explained by telling himself he just preferred for his life to be stable and that required those few close to him to get along.

"I'm sure he'll like you. He speaks some Bastion, not as well as I do but he learned when Dorena learned."

"Then I shall have to learn more Trade so we can speak together." He let Liam take the cloak from around his shoulders for him. "With my husband's permission, I'd like to be friends with the husband to his wife."

"I would like that but you don't have to like him to make me happy, Deseem. I just want the two of you to be able to get along together." He wasn't going to set impossible goals but just really wanted them to be civil to one another. It was the very fact that Deseem was aware of his desire that surprised him. As he hung up the boy's cloak he shook his head again about how rapidly the man was changing and in such nice ways.

By the time Liam made it to the stables, Norlan was already out of the saddle and swamped by the small group of Northern Clansmen that had made their home further south. Unlike most delegates and ambassadors, the people that made their homes in the steep harsh Northern mountains tended to rather work while they represented their people. They served as stablehands and weapons teachers and built a solid life while attending political meetings and

advising both the Senate and the crown. It was a fluid community, generally a member only stayed south for a few seasons before returning home but they were awfully close knit.

Norlan's arrival was like the arrival of a long missed loved one. Even those that had never met him before turned out to greet him and offer welcome. It was a community that Liam had often seen as a child and never been included into. The day after his first wedding every Clansmen acted as if he was now suddenly their own little brother or cousin and he'd been greeted as warmly as if he'd been raised among them. It was a strength he'd come to rely on and find comfort in even if he never quite managed to shake a feeling that he was still an outsider.

The small group that had worked in the stables and slipped over to welcome Norlan were chattering in the quick, short clipped vowels of their own language but they fell silent when Liam approached. There were a few more pats on Norlan's back and sharp barks of laughter before they gave each other knowing looks and slipped away to watch without being too obvious about it.

Liam wasn't quite running. It was bad luck for a Watcher to be seen running about the valley. It meant bad things had happened or were happening and that made people edgy. That kept his pace at a very brisk walk with Baxter darting ahead of him only to run back and hurry forward as if scolding Liam for being so proper. Baxter had no trouble bounding over to greet Norlan, tail wagging so hard his entire backend twisted and nearly knocked himself flat.

"Baxter!" Norlan greeted, falling to his knees and to let the large dog nearly maul him with kisses and wiggles. Norlan laughed merrily and glanced up as the dog's owner finally caught. Some of his laughter faded as his eyes grew more serious but none of his general amusement fled. "What are you feeding him? He's huge!"

Liam shrugged. He watched closely but didn't see any signal or command pass from man to beast but sure enough Baxter settled a little and took his happy massive body a little to the side.

Norlan stood up and had to glance up to meet Liam's eyes. "I think you've grown too." He nodded and his hazel eyes studied Liam carefully. "You look well."

"Norlan...I...." He'd thought of a dozen things to say to the man on the walk over and now face to face with him he found none of the words remained.

The older man shook his head and crossed the distance between them. "I've missed you." He spoke sincerely and without waiting for permission or approval he gathered Liam into a hug.

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Chapter Fifty Four

It took a moment for the contact to sink in to Liam's nervous brain but when it did he thought his legs might drop him. Norlan was quite a bit older than he was, older than Dorena had been but his body was lean and strong, wiry and tough like most of the people from the North were. Norlan's clan were known for being even shorter than some of the others, leaner, scrappier and twice as willing to pick a fight and get drunk after.

It wasn't just the contact but the man himself. Liam shivered from the very welcome, comforting hug and ducked down a little to tuck his face closer to the man. He smelled of fresh air, leather and horse, fallen leaves and road dust but Norlan always smelled of animals and fresh air. It was a combination of scents that made Liam sigh and both settle with eased comfort while a fluttery memory of the times they'd shared settled in his stomach.

"I've missed you as well." Liam muttered as Norlan patted his back a little and withdrew from the embrace. "I don't have a guest room in the suite we're using but I've made arrangements for you to stay in a suite in the same wing."

Norlan waved off the offer. "Won't hear of it, I'm staying with Berbia and her family. I've already promised them and they are distant cousins." He caught a hand into the loose shower of long white hair and let it slip through his fingers. "This is different."

Liam shrugged. "I keep meaning to trim it now that I'm not on the coast but I've gotten used to it."

"I like it, it suits you and I bet you like how seeing all that white hair makes people piss themselves in fear of you!" He laughed knowing full well how much Liam both liked and hated most people's reaction to him.

"Maybe." He swallowed his nerves. "We need to talk, but I'll let you settle in and rest. You have to be tired from your ride."

It was Norlan's turn to shrug. "I'm not that old, not yet anyway. Let's talk now. You'll worry yourself sick otherwise."

"The garden near our rooms is private. I can keep us from becoming chilled. There's a bench there, if that suits you." He didn't even try to deny the claim.

"Sounds perfect and I'm fine. It's barely cold down here!"

"It's colder every day, we'll have snow here soon." He guided them from the stables with Baxter dancing around them and out into the winter gray gardens toward the bench he had in mind.

"I'll help you build a snowperson. You do get enough for that here right? Wouldn't seem like winter without making at least one."

"Some years we don't but we should this one. Norlan, you got my letter." A Clansman could talk about the weather for an hour and be happy to do so. Liam's nerves couldn't handle that today.

Just as they could speak about the weather, so could a Clansman linger over a question, mulling it slowly, for almost as long before answering. Norlan stayed silent until the bench Liam was taking them to was in sight and it was only before he was about to sit that he spoke. "I did get your letter."

"I didn't know, they didn't tell me before hand. I'm sorry I didn't seek out your blessing before marrying again. There was no time."

Again a long silence lingered as Norlan scratched at Baxter's ears. Liam couldn't swear the man wasn't communing with the dog while he sat silently. He'd never really been sure just how Animal Empathy worked and Norlan's attempts to explain his magic had been as unsuccessful as Liam's

own efforts to explain being an Elemental.

"I'm not upset over that. I of all people know the sacrifices of treaty marriages." That wasn't a lie. He'd been willing to give up the only woman he'd ever loved to a treaty marriage and then been willing to share her with a younger man. "I won't lie to you, Liam, I've been worried about you since hearing of this union. I was so angry with your parents when I read that letter." He heard his voice go sharp and some of the anger returned. "It's cruel to ask you to wed someone from Bastion, unusually cruel. Are you well?"

Was he well? "I'm better than when we last saw one another."

Norlan snorted. "That wouldn't be difficult."

"I'm okay. I was angry at being recalled from the coast and I was unhappy about being stuck here for a few years but I'm adjusting. I had to scare off some Senators that tried to corner me in the library but over all everyone is leaving me alone."

"That isn't what I meant." He tried to read Liam but like always found it so difficult. "With this marriage, are you well?"

"I'm well."

"You've never felt the need to hide from me before. What is it? I didn't ride so far to have you pretend everything is perfect. Is it that he's a man? I know you didn't wish your preferences so displayed. Is he ugly or stupid? Is it that he's Bastion?"

Liam felt some of his control tremble. Norlan knew him in ways most people wouldn't ever be able to know him. "He's beautiful." He heard the sigh in his words and shook his head. "It was difficult, him being Bastion but, Norlan, I need to tell you something, something about Dorena and when we were captured..." He didn't want to poke at that wound again and he knew it would hurt twice as much because he'd also be poking at Norlan's wounds.

Norlan soothed a hand over Baxter's head and couldn't look at Liam. "Tell me." It was a bold answer. He'd never wanted to know too much about his wife's last hours. The thoughts his mind was able to conjure were bad enough and made him nearly crazed with hurt and helpless rage. He just couldn't turn away from Liam if the man finally felt able to share that time with him and he braced himself for the worst.

It wasn't easy but Liam started slowly and let the words spill from him at their own rate. It was important to tell Norlan, it was important that he understand that Deseem wasn't just Bastion. Not that he expected the man to hold any grudges against an entire people the way he had but he didn't want him carrying any resentment at all when he met Deseem. When the words finished the pair sat silently, unable to look at each other.

Norlan petted Baxter's head and tried to order his thoughts. "You're certain this is the same boy?"

"Completely." He sighed. "They've done awful things to him, Norlan. The way he was raised?" He shook his head. "It's been difficult but he's getting better. I owe him so much and I didn't understand. I wasn't kind to him at first, I was short tempered... and I didn't..."

That made Norlan chuckle. "You were yourself in other words?"

Liam shrugged. "I'm afraid so."

"And has he forgiven you for being a pain in everyone's ass?" He caught the unhappy frown Liam wore and laughed harder at the scowl. "I've missed you." His laughter softened the scowl Liam wore because the younger man knew he didn't laugh out of mocking cruelty. That had been

a lesson that had taken Dorena and him months to pound into the other man's stubborn head. "I'm not angry at you for re-marrying without a blessing. I do understand the situation. However, I can't offer my blessing to this union simply because it's a good pairing politically."

"I don't expect it."

"Liam, you've learned our ways well but you're missing the point. It's not about asking permission or a means of giving the surviving spouse control over the other survivor. We ask for a blessing from the other because we care for each other beyond the death of a joining spouse. For me to bless this union I need to know that it's good for you, that you will grow and find happiness in it the way you did before. Not granting it isn't a rebuke either. It's a responsibility, like it or not I will always feel responsible for you. It's a promise I made."

"Is that why you're here? Because you feel I need someone to look after me?" He tried not to sound bitter about it.

"No." Norlan answered carefully. "I came down here because I haven't seen you in ages and I've missed you and you're going to be in one spot long enough to have a real visit with. It's just a side issue that I give a shit if you're happy or not. Brat."

Liam rubbed his hands across his face as he leaned forward a little over his knees. "I'm sorry." A hand slipped over to rub at Liam's neck and the contact made him shiver and it was just what he needed.

"Stop that." He trailed the hand from the too tense neck to slip through the long soft hair again. "I think I like this."

There was a tone in Norlan's voice and a confidence to his touch that made Liam feel a little weak in the knees. If things were different it would have been a tone that said they should skip dinner and go straight to dessert. He wanted it, needed it. "Norlan..."

The older man sighed. "You're married."

"I'm trying to be honorable to that marriage."

Norlan cursed in Clanspeak and had to stand and pace a little bit muttering under his breath about stupid flatlander traditions. When some of his temper flared away Norlan stopped pacing and came to kneel in front of where Liam sat. "What is it about you?" He said in his own language. "A thousand men and I don't want them but five minutes with you and all I can think about is you naked under me." He teased a hand through the loose white hair that stood out so boldly against the black uniform and tried to study the hidden blue eyes. "If I don't find him worthy of you, marriage or not, I will have you before I leave this spring."

"Norlan..."

"My claim to you is older and I know the beauty of our snowflake."

"Norlan..."

"Don't scold me." He grinned and stood back up. "Tell me you haven't been celibate? That's the last thing she would have wanted from either of us."

"I haven't been."

"Good, now let's go meet this golden eyed husband of yours."

Liam stood and glanced toward the building. "Just, remember, they told him he was to be a

woman, a wife and beat him into believing it. He's getting better but he still fusses. It wasn't even until after this recent Healing that he could make any progress toward learning Trade but he's been pouring over his lessons every day so he can speak to you. Be nice to him, if nothing more he's a victim of his father's madness as well. Okay?"

Norlan hadn't expected Liam to be protective of his new husband quite as much as he was. It wasn't surprising now that he knew who the boy was and how damaged he'd been, Liam had always had a soft spot for those more helpless than himself but this felt like more than duty. "Of course I'll be nice." He snorted back but before Liam could scold him with the reminder of his different and often crazy Clan ways Norlan darted after Baxter and laughed as the dog barked in protest of being chased.

Norlan was still laughing as Baxter scolded him with very put out whines and barks as they came to the garden door. "Nice that you have access to the garden but I just don't get your flatlander need to layout gardens to be all perfect. This flower here that shrub there..." Norlan waved off the silliness of it all and let Liam open the garden door for him.

"It makes the gardeners happy." It should have been impossible but Baxter's tail wagged faster as he darted from the bedroom to the main room to find Deseem. "I'm almost jealous of how much that dog loves him."

"Huh." Norlan nodded but he wasn't worried about Baxter's sudden adoption of the new person in Liam's life. He followed the small parade into the main room and was surprised to find a slender young man kneeling down, scratching the dog's ears. At least he thought it was a young man, the boy was dressed in a long flowing, gauzy looking layered dress.

"You're home early, husband." Deseem greeted and glanced over his shoulder. The small smile on his face from greeting the dog fled when he saw the stranger in their rooms. He stood up and instantly started trying to pull the veil up from his shoulders to cover his face and hair but paused, drew a deep breath and stopped.

There was no hiding what Deseem had been trying to do but the fact that the boy was able to stop himself made Liam smile. "Deseem, this is Norlan, the husband to my first wife." He said in both Bastion and Trade. "Norlan, this is my husband, Prince Deseemdamiah."

Deseem had been nervous about meeting the other man for weeks and now he was here, in their rooms and he wasn't a thing like he'd expected. Norlan wasn't tall, not even as tall as Deseem was and looked even shorter compared to Liam's own lanky frame. Nor was he a powerful man, not overly broad in the shoulders or imposing but obviously a man used to working hard with a strong body to show for it. At first glance Deseem thought he was bald but he saw that the man's hair was simply cut very, very short, almost shaved short and it hid his receding hairline nicely. From how Liam had talked, or not talked, about him, Deseem had been expecting a handsome man, older than Liam but close to the same age. Norlan wasn't handsome, he wasn't ugly but rather had a simple, ordinary, plainness about him that was appealing in a very masculine way. He also wasn't young or even close to Liam's age. The man was a good decade or more older than Liam, his face tan and lined from smiles and sunshine.

Norlan stepped forward and smiled brightly. "Nice to meet you." He said in Trade and offered his hand.

Deseem knew the phrase and he curtsied a little, a sign of respect he'd never been required to show anyone but elder brothers and his father before he'd been sold as a bride. He ignored the offered handshake entirely. "It is my pleasure to meet the husband to my husband's first wife." He spoke softly in Bastion but paused and tacked on. "Nice to meet you." In the far less formal Trade.

The offered hand was withdrawn awkwardly and Norlan raised his eyebrows at Liam, unsure if

the refusal had been a snub or not.

"Lach's been asking after you and mother and father want you to make an appearance at Court for a formal welcome and all that." Liam added into the heavy silence of the room, Deseem just standing there, eyes down.

"I'll go by tomorrow. It's kind of them to receive me." Technically, Norlan was just another citizen of Corena and shouldn't be received formally at Court. He hadn't actually been wed to their son and so wasn't really a member of the family but no one mistook the nature of the relationship the three had shared. "Should I call on Lachlin?"

"I'll send him word, how about dinner tomorrow, all of us? Bekka, Lach, and the three of us? They have a child now."

"I heard in the dispatches, a boy. And that suits me fine." He glanced to where Deseem stood and the smile fluttered on his face. "It was very nice to meet you, Prince Deseemdamiah, I look forward to getting to know you."

Deseem bowed a little again but kept silent.

"Are you leaving?" Liam asked, surprised.

"I should get settled in and I could use a shower." The smile warmed when he saw the almost clinging desire for friendship in Liam's eyes. "I'll see you tomorrow, send me word about dinner." He reached down and ruffled Baxter's ears before moving to disappear into the bedroom and out the garden door with a whistle on his lips.

Liam was caught so off guard that Norlan actually made it outside before he caught up to the man. "Wait. I'm sorry." He called out in Clanspeak.

Norlan stopped. "For what?"

"I should have warned Deseem you were here, he doesn't deal with change easily yet. I didn't mean to make it awkward."

"It's not me you should be saying sorry too. I am the blundering fool from the past that has come stomping on his future. I'd be upset too if I were him."

"He's not jealous, it's not like that, he has privacy issues and a Bastion wife isn't supposed to speak to other men without direct permission."

Norlan reached out and took the taller man by the shoulders. He pulled him close into a hug and as he withdrew he placed a kiss to either side of his face. "You're still a fool but I still love you. Go back to your husband and tell him you're sorry and I'll talk to you tomorrow."

"But..."

"It's good to see you looking well." Norlan grinned cryptically and continued on the path back toward the stables, still whistling and with a light step.

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Chapter Fifty Five

Deseem knew he shouldn't, but he stood watching from the window. Liam ran after the shorter man and caught him. They spoke but they were too far away and the glass was too thick to allow him to hear anything. There was no need to hear them, he could tell by how they looked at each other, how they spoke to each other that they had a history. When they embraced and Norlan placed a small kiss on both sides of Liam's face, he felt his stomach turn over.

He shouldn't have been watching. What his husband did was his right and Deseem had no place to be upset. He wasn't even sure why he was upset, why seeing something as simple as a very brief hug and two very dry and innocent kisses should make him feel like he was turned inside out. Deseem hurried from the window to sit back in his chair so Liam wouldn't catch him spying.

Only sitting there it occurred to him that he wasn't hurt or sick, he was angry. So angry in fact that he wanted to throw something at Liam. He wasn't entirely sure why but he was really almost furious. He had been startled and surprised to find a stranger, worse to find Norlan, in his room and been caught off guard but he hadn't been angry. It was seeing the causal way Liam chased after then man, the casual way they were easy with each other that set off anger in his stomach.

The thought of Liam and Norlan together made him worse. It made him more angry. It wasn't like he didn't know they'd been lovers, Liam spoke about it sometimes in causal ways. He'd never hidden that while he'd been married to his wife, Norlan had been a lover too. It just had never occurred to Deseem that Liam might still love the man, or worse, desire him.

Liam who hadn't touched him since that night in the carriage in any way that was anything other than friendly or comforting, wanted Norlan. Deseem had no doubt of it, the chemistry between the men was obvious even to someone as naïve and ignorant of relationships as Deseem was. He'd known, Liam had never hidden or down played his relationship to the older man but Deseem hadn't really known. It wasn't until the man was standing in his room, kissing his husband, that Deseem felt like screaming. It just made no sense.

"Sorry about that." Liam said in Trade as he came back into their rooms. Deseem had wanted him to use Trade as much as he could and even Liam had been impressed with how much the younger man was learning. Only he found Deseem sitting in his chair, his spine straight as a board and his shoulders tensed.

Liam sighed and came to the front of the chair, he kneeled down trying to look into the amber eyes. "I'm sorry." He said in Bastion. "I didn't think to send you word that he was here. I didn't mean to put you on the spot like that." Generally when he'd tried to apologize for things in the past Deseem would shake his head and say his husband had no need to be sorry to him. Deseem didn't this time.

Instead Deseem stood up. "Excuse me, my husband, I should study."

"Deseem?" The shrouded figure just kept moving and sat at the table, catching the sunlight to read in his textbook. It made him frown. "I'm sorry, I didn't think. If I'd known bringing Norlan home unannounced would upset you I wouldn't have done it. I was thoughtless." That didn't even get Deseem to look up. "Want some help with your studies? I'm not a very good teacher but I

cancelled my class this afternoon. I've some time before my run with Lach...."

"I manage." Deseem answered in Trade to make his point.

Lach groaned and dropped himself onto the grass, not caring that it was still technically a public garden and he was Captain of the Watchers. "Gah I'm too old for this."

Liam paced around, breathing hard and knowing he'd pushed them both hard on their nightly run. When his heart had slowed enough he dropped down beside his brother. "You're not too old, you're too soft. If I'd stayed on patrol another couple of years you'd be all flabby and gross when I returned."

"I'm not allowed to get flabby and gross." He puffed and let his head thump into the ground. "Captain setting an example and all that." Lach glanced up and over. "So is Norlan's arrival why you're trying to kill us both with heart attacks?"

"I was happy to see him."

"How was his trip?" He flopped back down on the grass and watched the clouds float high over head.

"He said it went well. I thought we could all get together for dinner tomorrow night?"

"I'll let Bekka know."

They sat on the lawn together in silence as one well shaped cloud made it's way over head. "He looks good." Liam finally said.

"Old coot. I swear Clansfolk are crazier than spring squirrels."

"Maybe."

Lach lifted himself up on an elbow and tried to read his brother. "You're still in love with him."

"Don't be silly. We shared a wife."

"But you love him."

"Of course I do, he was like a husband to me too."

"No, no not like an obligation love or a friend love, you're still in love with him."

"I... it's not like that...he's not really kree..."

Lach snorted.

"He's not and I'm..."

"And you are."

"Maybe." Liam admitted for the first time where the depths of his desires tended to be. "Not that I have anything against women..."

"I understand. And here, seeing Norlan now, all it's doing is reminding you that he isn't kree and won't ever love you in the same way. That he could have married you as well at any point before

the war or after and didn't."

"That's a little more rawly honest than I'd like but yeah, something like that."

"I'm sorry Liam. You should love someone that can love you back."

"What's worse is I'm all...all twisted up over this and I took Norlan home to meet Deseem and now Deseem is angry with me for not giving him warning of company." He pushed stray hair back from his face. "I even offered to help him with his lessons before our run and he refused the help."

"I doubt he's angry with you. Don't think that boy has an angry bone in his body."

"He had one of the maids reading off words from his book yesterday but he wouldn't let me help him tonight."

Lach laughed and rubbed his eyes. "I take it back! Oh he's pissed at you alright. If he were Bekka I'd say bring flowers and candies and poetry or something with you back home."

"It's not funny. He's known for weeks that Norlan was on his way, how was I to know he'd be all twitchy at meeting him. I thought he'd be more angry to be excluded." He'd taken Norlan to meet Deseem before doing anything else.

"You know...nevermind."

"No, what? Tell me."

Lach sighed and watched another very nicely shaped cloud. "I don't know. Lady knows I've barely been around the boy but if he were Bekka? Or if he were a woman? I'd say he was jealous."

"Don't be stupid."

"I'm not! When Katilyn came back off of patrol I thought it would be nice to invite her in for dinner, catch up on old times you know?"

"Katilyn was which one, the black haired girlfriend?"

"No the blonde, Suziume was the black haired one with the longest legs I've ever seen..."

"Katilyn?"

"Yes, anyway, Katilyn and I were never anything more than physical but I don't care married or not, in love with my wife or not, she still gets to me, you know? Deep inside, not logical or thinking but something more primal..."

Liam frowned. "No more details please."

"Whatever, like you haven't slept with more people than me!"

"Short affairs don't count, they're for convenience."

"Keep telling yourself that." Lach laughed again. "I told Bekka who she was, that we'd been lovers, that we'd been friends and nothing more and she said she was okay with it. All through the dinner Bekka was smiles and gracious and understanding but as soon as Katilyn left? She about flayed me alive with the cold shoulder and huffy silent treatment. It took me a little bit to figure out that she was jealous because I still wanted to physically sleep with an old girlfriend."

Deseem sounds like he's jealous." He accented his point by wiggling a finger in Liam's general direction.

"He's not jealous."

"Why not?"

"Well, because our marriage isn't like yours. We're not emotionally invested in one another."

"Oh like hell. You might not be but that boy has everything he is wrapped up in you, like it or not. And I've seen how you and Norlan look at each other, it might just be physical but it's not subtle."

Liam's frown deepened. "We aren't... well, we aren't...Deseem and I..."

"You're still celibate?"

"Mostly."

"The rites showed he's not kree? You haven't said."

"No, not exactly." Liam felt himself blushing a little and hoped it would be hidden under the flush from the run that was still painted across his face.

"Liam?"

"He didn't respond to much of anything..."

"But?"

"But...apparently...he did to me. They let him spy on the private ritual."

"With you all naked and covered in oil...Bekka always demands to be allowed to watch. Frankly it makes me feel like a piece of meat, vulnerable and helpless..."

"Which would mean more if you weren't grinning just now thinking about it."

"So explain to me why knowing Deseem is attracted to you is a bad thing and why this doesn't prove me right that he's upset because he's jealous?"

"Because...well...we haven't a relationship like that...we don't..."

"You share a bed."

"And just sleep."

"Gods, you're hopeless." He tossed an arm over his eyes. "No wonder he's jealous. He's emotionally invested in you and your marriage and you keep him at arms length. And don't give me that look, you keep everyone at arms length I'm not being judgmental it's just how you're made. You don't let anyone in easily. So here the poor boy is, all wrapped up in being a wife and you're kind to him and not horrible, or any more horrible than you naturally are and he bonds to you emotionally and you are still treating him like a passing guest in your life. Worse? He's attracted to you and you won't touch him. I bet he thinks you're not attracted to him." Lach shook his head. "Or that he's not desirable, or wanted."

"He only desires me because I'm the only person that's ever touched him."

"Bullshit!" Lach sat up. "That's like saying because I desired Katilyn and she was the first one I

was touched by that I only ever will desire her. He didn't respond to anyone but you, that's deeper."

"I've been trying to be respectful, give him space to find himself in..."

"Liam, I love you, you're my favorite kid brother."

"I'm your only kid brother."

"So I say this because I love you. You're a brilliant man but you're an emotional moron."

That made Liam frown more and he dropped his eyes to the grass below him.

"You have two ways and only two ways when it comes to dealing with people. One is causal and cold, people you can laugh with and have a drink with but who never know a thing about you and who you never get close to. The other is full on inside that ice you hide behind where they're a part of your heart and soul. You don't do respectful distance. I hate to break it to you but you don't. Your respectful distance to Deseem must feel frigid to him."

"He....I...Lach I don't know..."

"Look you have to make a choice. If you're going to keep this marriage as one of only friends you need to move into a place with two bedrooms and start getting him to socialize. You need to tell him that so he knows it's okay to go beyond you for friendship and companionship. It's the only fair thing to do." As he lay there his vision wavered, dimmed over as his Sight tried to show him something. Only it was hazy, blurred, dirty looking and he squinted his real eyes trying to see through it. All he got was a glimpse, a flash of white hair and black and utter chaos around them. It made his stomach hurt and put panic in his chest but he was too well practiced to let it sweep him away. He never saw anything vivid or solid about Liam and was used to reacting badly when he did get a glimpse. "But, you're not sure that you want to do that."

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Chapter Fifty Six

Liam pulled strands of cold wilted grass up from the lawn. "He's so....and I'm just..." He sighed. "This would be easier if he wasn't so attractive."

"I'm not saying to lie to him, but if you're not going to try to build an emotional relationship with him you need to reassure him and comfort him."

"You mean physically."

"Since it seems the only thing the two of you agree on, yes, physically. That or you're going to have to deal with him being angry at you until Norlan leaves. He doesn't have any experience in jealousy. He just knows that you want someone more than him and unless you lay that to rest now, it's going to be a long winter." Lach was cooling down and starting to feel chilled.

"Even if it's true?"

He rolled onto his side and propped an elbow into the grass and used his hand to hold up his head. "Is it true? If you could only have one of them again and not the other, would you pick Norlan over Deseem?"

Would he pick Deseem and his responsiveness and how Liam felt so alive with lust filled amber eyes on him over Norlan who turned his knees to water and made him feel both weak and safe at the same time? "Deseem is my husband, I'll stay to those vows until he says it's okay not to."

It wasn't a surprising answer, if anything Liam was painfully aware of honor and took his oaths very seriously. "Then you need to commit to this marriage, Liam, and reassure that boy that he's first in your life, not Norlan. To do otherwise is cruel, and you're not a cruel man."

"I don't mean to be," he muttered.

"You're refusing him to protect yourself, not him."

"Maybe." He nodded and partially agreed. "He has asked that we touch more but I've been...reluctant. He's too beautiful, Lach, and I'm just a man."

"Well I can't tell you what to do with your marriage."

"Isn't that what you've been doing?"

"However," Lach went on and ignored his brother's comment. "You're all that boy has right now, like it or not. And trust me, a jealous, angry spouse...well, I recommend avoiding it at any cost. Remember when we were little and father slept in our wing? He wasn't doing it to read us bedtime stories. Mother threw him out because she caught him flirting with an old lover."

"I didn't know that."

He stood up with a groan and brushed off his uniform. "Well, it's the truth and not something they like brought up at dinner. I was too young to really know so you were way too little to understand, but Malcome and I were talking about it the other day. Speaking of which, I need to get home to my wife... I'll see you three tomorrow for dinner? Deseem is coming with you right?"

"I hope he will but I won't make him. He's more confident now and that's growing as he gets better with Trade, but it'll be his choice." Liam unfolded from the ground without protest, moving easily.

"Well, we'll be glad to have him. Bekka is all fussy that he's cooped up in your rooms. She thinks fresh air and socializing help heal any wound." He hid his amusement at Liam's look of absolute confusion. "Just go home and give in to temptation. Trust me, you'll both be a lot happier. Lady bless you're both young enough you shouldn't be able to keep your hands off of each other..." Lach muttered as he left, knowing it would make Liam uncomfortable and glad for it. Anything that could knock his brother out of the tight, narrow little cocoon he tended to hide in was a good thing.

Uncomfortable was something Liam didn't need more help feeling. The very idea that Deseem might have actually been jealous of Norlan surprised him. Worse, he hadn't thought by keeping his distance he was being cruel but he could see Lach's point. He opened the garden doors and

started to work the tie out of his hair. Only before he could shout that he was home he found Deseem on the bed, half curled up, his text book open but ignored beside him.

"I'm back."

"Welcome home, my husband," Deseem whispered but it had an automatic feel to the tone and the dark head didn't lift from his pillow.

"Are you not feeling well? Should I call a Healer?" He dropped the tie on the dresser as he went by and stopped to brush the back of his hand across Deseem's forehead. The boy wasn't running a fever, but he didn't respond to the question. Liam repeated it in Bastion as he moved to dig out a clean uniform.

"I understood." Deseem answered in Trade. "Tired just." He paused and sighed as he shut his eyes. "Just tired," he corrected himself.

"Rest, I'm going to get cleaned up." He waited until he was in the bathing room to strip down and shake out his hair from its braid. He'd grown even less body shy around Deseem since the ritual but found the idea of it awkward tonight. Was he just more comfortable nude around the other man or had he started to overlook him? Was he thinking about Deseem the way he would Baxter and so not minding being naked around him? It wasn't a comfortable thought.

He scrubbed his hair and skin nearly raw. Deseem had made so much progress and Liam was really trying to be understanding, or he thought he was. It was just that it had never occurred to him how risky, how much courage, it would have taken Deseem to say such simple things. It must have about killed the younger man to ask to be touched, to state that he liked it, given his history. He'd trusted Liam and it sunk into the pit of his stomach that Liam had been a poor keeper of that trust.

"Damn it." He cursed himself and shut the water off. Lach was right about one thing, something needed to be said or done. It was unfair to allow Deseem, an innocent in all the mess that was Liam's life, to be hurt.

Liam roughly towed off his skin and used a small thread of magic to help. Instead of fully redressing he just pulled on his uniform pants and shirt, leaving everything loose and relaxed. Deseem might not have been raised with the instant respect and proper distance seeing a Watcher's uniform could invoke but he wasn't immune to the formality of it.

Deseem was still on the bed, half curled up and ignoring his book. Carefully, Liam sat on the edge, his back to where Deseem was laying but he didn't take up the comb or try to start working the knots from his hair. "Deseem." He sighed. "I haven't been a good husband to you."

That stirred the resting form behind him and Deseem quickly slipped from the bed's soft surface, book clutched in front of his chest like a shield. "I should for dinner send," he said in his oddly accented and jumbled Trade.

Before the younger man could get halfway across the room Liam had moved and caught his arm. Deseem instantly froze, but he no longer flinched and that was a small but very real progress.

"Don't."

Deseem shook his head. "I will not..." He started to say and shook his head again.

Liam could almost see the boy censoring himself. "Say it," he invited in Bastion, hoping the boy would snap and chew him out and stop bottling what he felt inside. He'd been a jerk and deserved to be called out for it. More than that, Deseem deserved the voice, the right, to say

when he was upset and why he was upset.

With a sharp jerk, Deseem dared to pull his arm out of Liam's grip but it wasn't so that he could run away. He turned, amber eyes flashing with anger and a look of such fierceness on his face that Liam at first didn't know him.

"I will not stay and listen to this," Deseem protested in Bastion, lifted his chin and clenched his jaw. Defiant and knowing it would, or should, earn him a beating, but free enough now of the cleansing to need to stand up for himself. "You are my husband and I honor you but I will not stand by and listen to you say such things about yourself. You can not ask me to stand here and listen to you claim to not be a good husband! I will not stand for it. I will not tolerate it." He drew a breath. "I will not allow anyone, not even you, to speak so of my husband." He saw Liam's ice blue eyes go wide and then narrow. Deseem braced himself, held himself ready to at least be smacked for his arrogant defiance.

When Liam moved, Deseem didn't flinch. He didn't pull away or try to shelter his head or face. He'd earned his beating and he'd take it proudly and with dignity that he hadn't had for a long, long time. Liam's hands swung out and Deseem shut his eyes. The movement brought no stinging from a slap, no pain from a blow. The back of Liam's fingers trailed across his face and settled on his neck with tender care and, before Deseem could process the unexpected touch, lips covered his own.

His eyes flew open in surprise and he stumbled back. Liam followed him, his mouth nibbling in stubborn demands for the kisses Deseem was too startled to accept or return. The scent of Liam's freshly washed and still tangled hair surrounded him and Deseem felt his knees tremble. It wasn't from fear this time but the surge and rushing pounding of pleasure. He moaned, surprised and pleased, and parted his lips.

Deseem liked kissing. He liked it a lot. More, he liked it when Liam changed directions and surprised him with the soft, deep, gentle way he had of kissing that said he wasn't sure he should be kissing Deseem but couldn't stop himself. When the shock of those hungry lips melted from him, Deseem let his hands slip up. He wanted to touch Liam, wanted to pull the cloth that so rudely blocked all of his husband's odd, pale skin away. He wanted to press his fingers to the strength in his husband's body and feel it tremble below his touch.

Back they moved in stumbling, unguided steps, both seeking something solid in a world turned around by need and desire so suddenly sparked and finding nothing to stabilize themselves against. Deseem felt one of Liam's legs try to slip between his own and the fabric of the dress stopped him. The denial made a disappointed groan bubble up from Liam's throat and the sound stole any thought Deseem might have had. Back they stumbled until Deseem felt the edge of the half open door behind him. His hand reached back and traced the edge and without asking he pushed the door shut.

It latched with a solid bang and click and soon rattled again in its frame as Deseem was almost roughly shoved against the now solid surface. It wasn't a move of violence but it was one of force and it rattled Deseem's body. Oddly, instead of making him feel afraid, it made him want to laugh, it made him want to slither his body against his husband's and tempt him to shove him against the door again. It was a devious plan that Deseem quickly forgot as Liam's kisses found spots on his neck that made him shiver and his husband's hands swept over his cloth covered body.

It was perfect and wonderful and Deseem didn't care if it was his lust for Norlan that pushed Liam past his distance, he was just grateful to be on the one in his husband's arms. Until Liam stopped, with no warning, he simply stopped. The mouth stopped nibbling and kissing Deseem's neck and the hands stilled on his body. It made Deseem whimper a little and he opened his eyes.

What he saw worried him. Liam was close, his body still mostly pressed to Deseem's own, but

he'd pulled away far enough to really look at Deseem. The blue eyes looked a little shocked, a little startled and Deseem wondered if maybe it had sunk in which husband it was that Liam was holding to the door. It made Deseem's lips tighten into something close to a frown and he knew he looked worried as he studied his husband's face for clues.

Only he didn't see regret or disappointment in the so difficult to fathom blue. The more he looked, the more Deseem was sure he was seeing concern and worry, maybe even a little fear and certainly a great deal of shyness. Sense fell onto Deseem like raindrops soaking into a parched ground and he understood. Liam hadn't stopped or paused because he'd forgotten which man he was with but because he knew too well who it was he had been kissing. His husband had paused to give Deseem the chance to refuse or to stop and escape.

The knowledge turned his tight, unhappy expression into an easy, real smile. Deseem brought his hands up and soothed them across Liam's face. He really didn't know what he was supposed to say to let his husband know it was alright and he was welcome. As his fingers slipped across the loose white hair he knew and brought his hands to the ends of the braids that held his own hair. With quick motions he pulled the ties away and roughly untwisted the braids.

Black hair spilled everywhere and the look in the blue eyes became one of pain. Deseem tilted his head back, chin jutting out proudly and glanced through heavy lidded eyes at his husband. Deseem pressed his hands flat against the door he'd been pinned against and felt his lips curl up in a smile that bordered on an arrogant smirk. The way Liam was looking at him made him feel really good and alive and proud for the first time in years. He challenged his husband without ever saying a word.

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Chapter Fifty Seven

It must have worked because before Deseem could even start to doubt what he'd thought he'd seen in Liam's eyes, his husband moaned and was soon devouring his mouth once more. Deseem held still and let Liam kiss him, let the more experienced man guide their contact. He hung onto the door and let sensation sweep him away.

Liam tried again to slip their bodies closer, to guide his legs around Deseem's and the fabric of the dress again stopped him. "Stupid dress..." Liam cursed as he broke the kiss and stepped away a fraction. Before Deseem could react to suddenly not being kissed silly, Liam had knelt down and caught his hands on the hem of Deseem's dress.

"Husband..." Deseem questioned breathlessly and tried to offer to remove the dress. Before he could get the words out Liam's hands ran up the sides of his legs, drawing the layers of fabric up with them. "Oh...oh..." Deseem's head dropped back against the door with a thud as those hands continued to glide higher up his legs. Up over his knees, over his thighs, higher across his hips to

settle in a bunch of fabric around his waist and it made him shiver the entire way.

"Oh Lady bless..." Liam moaned. "You don't...." He'd been assuming Deseem would or did wear some form of britches, but found nothing under the annoying skirts but more of the other man's skin.

"Husband?" Deseem whispered but a fabric covered leg slipped between his own now exposed legs. A strong thigh brushed against Deseem's groin and the friction of the fabric stunned his breath from his lungs. Worse, one of his own legs was nestled between Liam's and the bare flesh of his naked leg was being tormented by hints and touches of his husband's body.

Liam's arm slipped around his waist and Deseem's head lolled to the side to allow his husband as much space as possible to continue his desperate assault. Lips to the skin of his neck, something so seemingly innocent and simple, was a sensation Deseem found addictive. The free hand on his waist slipped lower, work roughened fingertips teased with absolute care over Deseem's hip, over the small of his back and lower to gently cup his backside. It was teasing and gentle and reminded him of how good it had felt to have his husband's hands on his naked skin. The memory made him flush red in desire and remembered lustful embarrassment.

The teasing hand slipped over his hip and Deseem forgot how to return kisses, how to even breathe as the hand moved under his dress. The fingers glided with what felt like deliberately maddening slowness over his skin but instead of gliding between his legs, the fingers slid outward. Deseem moaned a little, disappointed because he had liked his husband's hands on his skin and on his manhood best of all. His protesting mew didn't make the hand change its course, it slipped down his thigh and caught his leg.

It was a gentle tug but it didn't take much force or direction to mold Deseem when he felt like his bones had turned to water. Liam's hand was strong and firm and gripped his leg. Soon it was raised and Liam hitched it up high to his own hips level, groaning with his own desire as the new position allowed him to step even closer to Deseem's body. It felt odd to have one leg so raised, so awkwardly held, the naked skin of his body exposed to the cooler air of the room. It felt odd until Liam stepped forward and his cloth covered groin rubbed lightly, directly, into Deseem's. That felt good enough that they both moaned and Deseem was glad to be pressed to the door because he wasn't sure he could stand on his own any longer.

"Not enough..." Liam moaned against Deseem's neck and the hand that had been holding his leg so high drifted away.

That meant the leg started to slip and the lust clouding his thoughts made it difficult to remember how to move his legs, let alone what he was supposed to do with his exposed leg at his husband's waist. Liam groaned and quickly reached back to hike the leg higher back on his hip, grinding their bodies together again. This time when Liam's free hand wandered away Deseem knew to keep his leg in place. He lightly wrapped it around his husband's body.

"Yes.... Oh yes...." Liam sighed.

Under the fabric of his dress Deseem could feel movement and he guessed that was where Liam's free hand had disappeared. Since it didn't return to touching him he wasn't sure what was happening and he had a moment to wonder if his own innocence was causing him to miss something important. Maybe he was supposed to touch himself, pleasure himself? Maybe Liam was doing just that? If they were supposed to pleasure themselves while touching and kissing he didn't want to disappoint.

"Ohhh...there....there...." Liam whispered and the odd motions under the dress disappeared.

The hand returned to Deseem's leg, supporting it, stroking it. Liam paused, stopped kissing him and Deseem had learned that was a hint to open his eyes. When he did he fell into blue fire and

the look of such desperate need and want made him whimper. He liked that look, really liked knowing he was the cause of such passion in the normally cold eyes, and he could have spent hours studying them.

Except Liam stepped forward again, rubbing in a long slow motion his body into Deseem's. Only this time there was no catch of fabric and just the smooth glide of desire to desire, flesh into flesh. Liam had released his leg long enough to open his own pants, as hungry for skin to skin contact as Deseem was himself. It was breathtaking and Deseem had to shut his eyes to be able to stand it, Liam's breath panting sharply in his ear with each long, hungry glide of their bodies.

Without any real thought to it, Deseem tightened his leg around Liam's waist. Without really knowing what he was doing he tried to pull his husband closer, tighter to him and he felt the shivering trembles that sent across the strong man. It was then that it occurred to Deseem what position and angle he'd be in if his other leg was also around Liam's waist. It wouldn't take much for his husband to slip into his body again, to fill him and take him as he should. It wouldn't take much for Deseem to be pinned to the door suspended on his husband's manhood, moaning in need and pleasure, shivering in release together.

The thought made his body writhe and he fought the urge to kick his other leg up around Liam and see if he could make the fantasy a reality. Deseem wasn't so graceful or so knowledgeable. He didn't fluidly embrace Liam with his legs and Liam wasn't going to take the pleasures of the marriage bed against their bedroom door. Instead all his writhing managed to do was cause the folds of bunched up skirt to slip free and fall between their bodies. It returned layers of obscuring fabric so their flesh no longer ground together bareness to bareness.

Liam groaned in frustration so low and deep in his throat it sounded like a growl. "I hate these dresses!" he confessed.

The words were in Trade but Deseem understood. "I do too," he admitted as Liam's hands slipped out from under the fabric, leaving his legs again to be cloaked and untouched.

Instead the surprisingly tender hands cupped Deseem's face and locked blue eyes to golden. "Put them aside?" he pleaded.

The sincerity surprised Deseem not so much because Liam meant what he was asking, but because for the first time Deseem could accept what he was asking. He wasn't sure he could fully put away the veils but for the first time he really believed that with such warm sincerity from his husband he could agree and stop the compulsion to dress as a woman. Carefully, Deseem nodded his agreement. "I will," he whispered back.

"Good..." Liam's eyes drifted down across Deseem's face and lower. "Deseem..."

He heard the doubt again, the uncertainty and Deseem smiled gently. He'd have to prove to his husband that he welcomed his touch because the man was too honorable to use what he perceived was force. "Take the dress from me, my husband." Deseem spoke softly but he kept his gaze steady and bold. Even if the thought of being nude and under his husband once more both made him tremble in shy fear and consuming desire, he knew he wanted it again. "Take it from me."

"Oh Lady protect me..." Liam moaned and had to shut his eyes for a moment to maintain his control. When he opened them again Deseem was met with a small smile. "I can do that..."

Something hot flared around Deseem and he was confused for a moment. Soon he caught the scent of burnt silk and felt heat dart across his body. He thought perhaps Liam had called magic and charred the fabric from his body, a display of power and control that would impress even him, but it was better, greater. The fabric was intact, the fine silk thread alone charred to ash. As he breathed the seams now turned to ash fell like fine dust to the floor around him and the linen

and silks he wore slipped from his body like forgotten fall leaves. He arched his spine from the door in a long slow ripple and the fabric behind him fell into a pool at their feet. The cooler air danced around his now exposed fevered skin as Liam stepped back to be able to look at him.

Blue eyes burned into his skin as they raced over his body. The look Liam wore made him feel immodest and sinful even knowing the lust and desire directed at him was from his husband. Worse, Deseem liked it so very much. Suddenly he worried that Liam would again pause or hesitate. They'd share touch again and maybe kisses, maybe the better kind of kisses from their wedding night that still fevered his dreams. That was nice, better than nice, but Deseem wanted more.

He stepped to the side away from the door and away from Liam. He could feel his husband's eyes following him, drinking in the glow of his skin the candle light as he walked across the room on bare feet. When he reached the bed he stopped, placed one hand on the bedpost and turned to stand boldly facing Liam, open and hiding nothing from the hunger in the blue eyes.

"Husband?" He whispered with a voice that trembled. "Take me as your wife?" He paused and licked his lips that now felt dry and alone without hot kisses raining down on them. "Make me your husband?" he corrected and took his hand from the bedpost. He let it rest against his chest and slowly let it sink down, down lower. It stopped at his hips, Deseem blushing at the thought but with only a pause he let his hand drift lower. His hand curled around his own length and he had to hide by shutting his eyes. It was horrible and immodest and bold but Liam seemed to respond to boldness and not at all to submissive agreement.

"By all the gods...Deseem...I..."

He opened his eyes, fearful he'd done too much, pushed too hard. Liam stood where he'd been, eyes wide and lips parted. He was shaking his head in denial but his eyes watched every motion of Deseem's body. Until their gaze met and it was as if the room had been set on fire around them. What last fragments of control his husband had clung to melted under the heat and he moved.

The black cloth stripped away without any effort for show or drama. It was a simple need to remove it and have it and any other barrier between their skin gone. Liam's pants, already open, fell away easily and when he stripped off the shirt he shook out his hair all while stalking across the bedroom with a single-minded need. Almost before Deseem could comprehend so much exposed pale skin, Liam was before him.

Strong hands caught him under his arms and physically lifted him up. Deseem found himself being bodily moved back and not quite but almost dropped onto the bed's soft surface. The urgency would have frightened him before, but he knew now Liam wouldn't hurt him, not knowingly. As his husband crawled onto the bed to hover over him, Deseem shivered with the need to touch so much pale skin. He didn't have to find the courage to reach across the space between them because Liam had no troubles touching him and he forgot the desire to touch in the pleasure of being touched.

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Chapter Fifty Eight

His husband's hands were suddenly everywhere. Their bodies were stretched out long together, Liam tucked a little to Deseem's side but his hands were bold. Not like their wedding night when he'd been unwilling to be so free to explore, now the hands roamed. They stroked over his face and neck, his shoulders and chest. Fingertips teased his ribs, lightly tormented his nipples in passing fluttery touch. The hands slipped around him to stroke his back and sides, to tease the top of his ass and the curve of his hips. Hands snaked between them to torment the sensitive skin of his lower belly before gliding over his hips and thighs. Only they grew bold and dove freely between his legs to cup, stroke and fondle him without lingering before they slipped away to find more skin to tease and torment.

All while Liam's mouth added to the torment. It left Deseem feeling devoured as hot kisses fell across his skin almost as randomly as Liam's hands explored him. A kiss covered his mouth and then reappeared to kiss the tip of his nose only to disappear and kiss his chin, his eye lids, his forehead, his ears, his cheeks, his shoulders, his neck and down to his chest and nipples. All as fluttery, all as random and ever moving and changing as if Liam couldn't decide just what he wished to kiss or touch and was overwhelmed with the choices.

That was fine with Deseem. His body shivered and writhed under the assault. He let his head loll on the soft bed and didn't stop the gasping, startled, wanting moans that fell from his lips. His hands forgot to be shy and carefully risked stroking Liam's hair and shoulders, down the length of the taller man's spine, wandering on their own but mindlessly. Liam didn't protest and Deseem liked feeling so much skin under his hands.

"Deseem...mmm....wait....we need....oh Lady bless.... Oh..." Liam moaned and whatever he was going to say they needed disappeared into sighing moans as Deseem's hands wandered lower, stroking across his husband's backside and hips with hints of deeper, rougher touch that he didn't know how to deliver.

"What?" Deseem whispered against Liam's ear. "Whatever you need, my husband, I will provide..." He hadn't meant it to sound erotic but as the words slipped out they made both of them shiver with the promise of so much.

"Oil...we can't without...won't hurt you..."

The little glass vials of oils had stayed on the table by their bedside even when all the other accretions of romance and seduction of the wedding night had disappeared. Deseem hadn't given them a thought since but his mind darted back to that night and he remembered their use. He would have blushed at the idea that servants occasionally checked the little bottles to see if they needed refilled the same way they checked the supply of soap and clean towels. He just wasn't sure if he was more embarrassed that they would know that he'd been taken by his husband again or because they knew Liam hadn't touched him since that night.

"I can reach..." Deseem sighed and turned a little to stretch and reach toward the table. His movement didn't stop Liam's hands but it brought the hungry mouth to new areas and Deseem was shocked to find he liked the side of his hip being kissed as much as he liked any other inch of skin being kissed. "Oh...husband..." He shivered and tried to concentrate on not dropping the glass bottle he had reached. They all had stoppers but he doubted it would prevent a full spill. "husband?" Deseem sighed but Liam's hands were busy drinking in the touch of his skin and he wasn't sure if he wanted the man to stop long enough to accept the glass.

Liam sighed and finally took the vial from Deseem. He lifted the stopper and sniffed the contents before shaking his head. "No, too heavy...oh...oh gods help me....Deseem... stop...I can't..." His eyes slipped shut and he missed the innocent evil look in Deseem's own golden.

"I'm sorry, my husband." Deseem whispered without sounding very sorry and removed his hand from his husband's length.

The tone of Deseem's voice popped Liam's eyes open and he studied Deseem's face. "You're teasing me..."

"I..." He wasn't sure if Liam liked the idea of being teased or not. "I like the way you look when being pleased, my husband." Deseem whispered. "I like touching you...if I've done too much...I..." His words were stopped with a kiss that stopped his worry and fears. "mmmm...oh..." Deseem sighed as his mouth was freed.

"The green bottle with the red on it." Liam whispered and pressed the little bottle Deseem had retrieved back into his hands.

"Yes, my husband." Deseem answered submissively but with little submission in his tone.

Only this time as he turned to stretch to reach the small table the touch and kisses didn't stay on his hip. As if in payback for teasing Liam, his husband returned the torment but with greater skill. The small vial clicked onto the table and Deseem's world disappeared into a single point of contact. His body writhed and he moaned before he could glance down and see Liam, lips parted and just the tip of Deseem's length slipping inside his husband's mouth to be teased. Deseem's hips weren't sure what to do, it still instantly felt wrong to allow his husband to pleasure him in such a way, it still felt like something he should be providing to his husband instead of receiving. While his mind churned with the wrongness of being so pleased instead of pleasuring, his body wanted to push forward and bury all of his hardness in that heat.

He was saved from having to make a choice by Liam leaning away. He watched the amusement spread across the normally cynical face as Liam licked a little at his lips. Deseem would never have considered the small action as anything lewd but seeing it now made him shiver.

"Green bottle with red." Liam reminded him.

Deseem nodded dumbly and pried his eyes from the very contented satisfied look in the blue eyes. He didn't hesitate now, just stretched out and snatched the proper bottle as quickly as he could. If Liam teased him again, he knew he'd drop the oil and spilling it was not an option. He needed what they were going to do too badly to risk losing the chance to a bit of clumsiness.

"This is the one..." Liam nodded as he checked the contents but kept the stopper mostly in place.

As soon as Liam took the small bottle from his hands Deseem wiggled away a little. He'd replayed their wedding night over and over again in his thoughts so often he doubted he had forgotten a single detail. Liam had asked him to lay on his back that night and Deseem wasn't going to make him ask this time. He still felt exposed to be so laid out like he was but this time he wasn't frightened, just restless and wanting.

"Oh...pillows..." Deseem remembered and turned to reach over his head to pull one of the extra pillows on their bed. Liam had placed pillows under the small of his back and he'd forgotten.

Before he could get the pillows in place, one of Liam's hands caught his wrist and stopped him. He glanced over and saw one of his husband's difficult to read looks, something sad and hungry and shy all at the same time. Deseem let his arm go limp and dropped the pillow. "Husband?"

Liam just shook his head and let a hand trace up from Deseem's knee, over his thigh and hip to

rest on his waist. "There's other ways..."

His husband seemed to be waiting for some response so Deseem nodded his agreement. That must have been the right thing to do because Liam moved now. He crossed the bed and sat with his back to the headboard, within arms reach of the small bed side table where he carefully replaced the glass bottle. He reached out a hand to Deseem and that was all the invitation Deseem needed.

It felt odd to half crawl across the bed without any clothing on, Liam's eyes watching every motion of his bared body, but he quickly scurried up to the headboard. Without any real idea of what they were going to do he turned and sat as Liam was, his back to the headboard and legs out in front of him.

"No...no..." Liam shook his head but his voice held no scolding. "Here..."

Hands closed around the side of Deseem's ribs and around one arm and gently tugged at him. He frowned a little but let them pull him over. Liam's hands moved him, tucked his legs, turned his body and soon he understood. He was supposed to sit across his husband's naked lap, facing him and the thought made his skin flush red in desire and embarrassment. He wanted to ask if it was okay, if he was doing it right, if it was proper but as he settled down their bodies found each other. There was no need for words, Deseem knew it was okay and he moaned his approval as he rocked their bodies together again.

Liam's one hand gripped his hips but didn't stop him or guide him, just held on to him as Deseem tossed his head back and let his body enjoy all the shivering delight that came with such intimate contact. Even when Liam's other hand, slick with oil brushed against his backside, slipping into hidden places to lightly tease him he didn't stop. Those slick fingers surprised him a little, even knowing what he did of their wedding night, Deseem had forgotten how startling it was to feel someone touch someplace so private, so hidden.

There was no whispered words from Liam this time. No pause in hesitation and uncertainty. Deseem remembered being told to relax and he struggled to do that now but he wanted too badly to really ease his body and as his husband pressed one slick finger gently into his body, Deseem arched and forced more of it into him. He moaned at the feel and instead of being scolded for taking when a wife should only receive what was given, he was met only by Liam's own gasping, panting breaths.

His hands were on the headboard behind Liam but he found as the single finger became two deep in his body, that they developed a mind of their own. All of his husband was displayed out in front of him. The white hair spilled everywhere like strands of silver moonlight and he twined them around his fingers. In his uniform Liam looked lanky and slender but exposed and nude Deseem's fingers drank in the strength in his husband's shoulders, in his arms, in his chest. The pale skin like poured milk over steel and Deseem trembled knowing he belonged to such a man.

Liam had placed him over his lap to invite him to boldness. Deseem was sure of it now. Every touch, every time he rocked their bodies together, Liam encouraged him with panting moans and desperate kisses. Desire had melted the normally cold blue eyes and Deseem could feel the strong body below his brought weak and trembling with need. Encouraged, he rolled his thumbs over the pink circles of Liam's nipples and was shocked to hear his husband nearly whimper. The white head dropped to the bed behind him and the blue eyes closed. The fingers filling his body grew rougher as both men grew impatient with such careful preparation.

"I can't..." Liam panted. "Need you...oh gods I need to be in you..." Liam moaned.

The fingers left his body and the emptiness was shocking but Deseem hoped they'd retreated because his husband was really going to take him, as a husband should. It took a little fumbling because Liam didn't seem able to put a coherent thought together to speak in Bastion to explain

but Deseem soon understood that one of his hands was wanted. A small bit of the oil was dribbled into his palm, the glass stopper rattled in it's vial as Liam replaced it and put it aside. It didn't take much guiding from there for Deseem to wrap his oil slick hand around Liam's length. He liked the way that felt, the oil slippery between his fingers, his hand gliding boldly over his husband's body. Most of all he liked the desperation that moaned from Liam's throat at the long, teasing strokes as he rubbed the oil over his husband's manhood.

"Deseem..." Liam moaned and his hands clutched at Deseem's hips.

He let those hands guide him higher, forward, knowing what they were going to do, what was going to happen and needing it. Something slick and hot and larger than a finger pressed against his opening and Deseem shivered when all it did was brush that hidden spot.

Liam caught his oil slick hand and drew it behind him and Deseem was surprised to find his fingers pressed to Liam's length again, guided up to touch his own entrance and down the hard shaft. This time when that hardness teased his body his hand slipped up and guided it, welcomed it toward his flesh. His husband was silently asking Deseem to take himself, to guide his length into his body, to do more than passively lay on his back and be taken. Liam was asking without words for Deseem to join them and as understanding dawned in his lust fogged mind he moaned. His hand held the hard length still and he lowered his hips down and back.

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Chapter Fifty Nine

There was a horrible moment of pressure and heat and Deseem wondered if he was doing something wrong. He drew a deep breath and comforted himself with the knowledge that Liam hadn't let him do anything wrong yet and, as if the breath or thought had been enough to sooth him, his body eased. The crown of Liam's hardness breeched his body, barely filling him, and it burned a little as he remembered but wasn't what he'd call pain. The sense of fullness, of being taken and belonging, the feeling of being wanted so desperately made up for any minor discomfort he might have felt. Deseem wanted more and he would have pushed his hips all the way down, hard, if the grip on his hips hadn't stopped him.

"No..." Liam panted. "Slowly... slow... gods... I....oh...slow..."

Slow was a word Deseem wasn't sure he remembered the meaning to. He'd waited to return to this moment for so long that he'd almost believed Liam hadn't wanted him. If there wasn't still a lingering desire to please his husband with obedience, he may very well have ignored the request and the steadying hands and forgotten all about slowly. For all his protest to the slow filling of his body, when Deseem found he could press himself no longer, his fingers telling him by touch that he had slipped all of his husband into his body, he whined a little in protest.

Liam stroked his face and Deseem opened his eyes at the tender touch. "Is this okay?" Liam asked when faced with amber eyes.

Deseem nodded, panting, struggling to draw in lungfuls of air that didn't feel like enough. "What...oh...what now?" he forced himself to ask, since Liam didn't seem like he was going to be tossing him on his back and reenacting their wedding night.

The question made Liam smile and he leaned in and kissed Deseem's parted lips. "Whatever you wish..." he whispered into an ear.

"Really?" Deseem questioned and as Liam nodded his approval he wiggled his hips a little, moving that wonderful, filling hardness inside of his body. It lit up pleasure across his own nerves and made Liam moan. "Oh... oh... husband..." He sighed as he lifted his hips a little and slipped that wonderful length from his body, shivering as it retreated and trembling as he lowered himself back down again.

It was like being given the best gift ever. Liam's hands stroked his body, touching him with hunger tempered with tenderness and he was left to explore freely. He rocked his hips forward and back, side to side and found each small motion exploded new sensations in his body. Some he liked, some he loved, but each new angle, each bit of movement, taught him more of what his body could feel. He soared on the sense of power it poured into him, delighted in the looks and sounds of pleasure his small and sometimes not so small, motions rung from his husband.

"Hus...hus...husband..." Deseem moaned, sweaty now and knowing he was growing loud with his cries and unable to stop from sounding immodest while Liam kissed his chest and tormented his nipples. "I...I...oh... oh God protect me.. I... I'm on... on fire... I..." He was moving harder now, faster, needing to reach his release and unsure how long his trembling legs could continue to hold him. "Husband!" He cried out as Liam's hand wrapped around his forgotten length, gripping it firmly, stroking what had been mostly neglected.

Liam shook his head. "Say my name... oh say my name..."

Deseem bit his lip and tossed his head back, pushing himself hard and roughly against his husband's length, filling himself over and over as the strong hand stroked him. "Oh.... oh.... God... Liam... ohhh..." any further words or moans dissolved into whimpering cries as his body clenched up into a tight knot of fire and exploded into sparks of blinding pleasure. He didn't even feel his body release itself, so lost was he in the pleasure, in calling his husband's name while being filled and claimed so fully.

He was shivering but not in pain or fear or hopelessness but because he had never known a body could feel such delights. As sensation returned in small slight fragments Deseem became aware that Liam was holding his body steady, Deseem's hips hovering in place now, and below him Liam was thrusting hard upward. The hard, fast, filling and emptying and filling again while his body was still sparks and tingles of pleasure made him sigh happily and moan with exhausted pleasure. There wasn't even energy left in him to worry that he'd taken so much pleasure and not seen to it that his husband reached his own release, he just held himself there, hovering with the last of his strength, while Liam took him hard and fast.

It wasn't for long. Liam was gasping for breath and moaning low in his throat. Soon Deseem felt strong hands pulling him down hard to meet the rough upward jerking thrust of his husband's body. Their flesh contacted with sharp smacks that made him smile in a happy sated way but Liam didn't notice. His eyes were shut and he clung to Deseem, trying to pull him tighter, to bury himself deeper into his flesh a moment before he was whimpering, groaning as he shuddered his release.

Deseem had been too surprised to find pleasure instead of terrible, horrible pain on their wedding night to really have noticed Liam finding his own release. He couldn't recall what it had felt like,

but he felt it now. Hot, spilling fire poured into his body and he liked it, liked knowing what it was and that it was that spilling of his husband's pleasure into his body that had claimed him as wife.

Liam's arms tightened around him, held him so close it almost was painful but Deseem didn't squirm or protest. The rough thrusts into his body slowed, eased and stilled. It left them seated there, clinging to each other, sweat covered naked skin to skin. Deseem would have been happy to stay there until time ended but his legs started to cramp, painfully so, and he made a mistake by giving the pain away with a hushed noise.

"I've hurt you?" Liam spoke as his breathing slowed.

Deseem shook his head. "My legs..."

"Oh!" Liam had forgotten how legs could and would cramp up in this position, it had been so long since he'd been in Deseem's position, but now that he was reminded he remembered. Gently he lifted Deseem up, smiling at the mournful sigh Deseem offered as their bodies parted, and very carefully helped the still too slender boy to lay on the bed beside him. The long, slender, beautiful legs twitched as they cramped up and Liam gently rubbed at them in what he hoped was a soothing way. It took a moment but soon Deseem's legs were stretched out before him growing as relaxed as the rest of him. "I didn't mean for us to do quite this much." Liam spoke as he rubbed at the wonderful legs. He glanced up but Deseem was splayed on the bed and pillows looking languid and very satisfied. "I hadn't really meant to do anything."

"Mmm I'm glad you did... oh..." Deseem sighed and wiggled his toes. He was sweaty, sticky, and most likely would be sore but it was the best he'd ever felt. "Thank you." He whispered and the hands on his legs fell still.

"You don't need to thank me for a gift shared." Liam wanted to draw the other man close and hold him tight, drink in the feel of his dusky skin against his own pale.

Deseem wiggled a little until he could see Liam without having to lift his head. "No, thank you... I... I had thought fear and worry had clouded my memories and your touch, your taking, couldn't have felt as it did. It made me...makes me wish my husband weren't such an honorable man and would take his pleasure with me more often."

The raw honesty shocked Liam but it was another sign of the other man's progress and healing. "I'm starting to wish I would as well." He stretched out and turned to lay where he could watch Deseem. "We both know why I haven't."

"Because you still love Norlan." Deseem answered without hesitation. "I don't mind knowing that. I didn't like seeing it... I... I've forgotten that I must share you. I'm sorry, my husband."

"What? No..." But as he started to deny it Deseem dropped his eyes, unwilling to watch him as he lied. "I do love Norlan. I won't apologize for that, but I haven't denied you because of him. Deseem... you're so beautiful and have been too willing. I am just a man, when I touch you casually I want to touch you more and when I touch you more I want what we just shared. I can't help it, you drive me to distraction with desire for you."

Deseem reached out and stroked his fingertips over the shower of white hair. "You could have had me however you liked from the day we wed."

"I couldn't have. I couldn't... I... It isn't just that two groups of people said 'here, you're married'. Spouses aren't property here to be done with as one pleases. I'm not that kind of man. I couldn't... not without knowing. It may seem pointless to you, but I need to know the person I share my bed with is doing so because they desire to share their bed with me. Not because they feel it's my right to have them. No matter how badly I want them, desire them, it isn't enough without that." He was exhausted, physically as well as emotionally and knew he was likely to say

too much when in such a state.

"And I was too damaged to safely speak of things, to make a choice without the cleansing making it for me." He spoke with his eyes still lowered.

"I had no way of knowing if what you said was from duty or if it was what you wished."

"So you did the only thing you could do..." Deseem wouldn't have believed it a month ago. His mind couldn't have processed that any of the denial and distance between them was from any source other than being a disappointment as a wife. "Now you see why I will not allow anyone to speak ill of my husband? What other man would be so kind to a stranger, especially one so damaged?"

"Many," Liam dismissed and rolled onto his back.

"Only one." Deseem answered and followed, curling up against Liam's side without asking permission. He felt the body below his grow tense at the sudden contact but, with a sigh that rattled through Liam's chest, he soon relaxed. "Husband?" Deseem asked, groggy from physical effort but not overly sleepy.

"Hmm?"

"May we stay like this for the night?"

"Like this?" It took a second to sink in that Deseem meant naked and touching, curled together in bed like kittens. "I tell you what. Let me put on a robe and go send dinner back so it isn't ruined. We'll shower and after that we can spend the rest of the night in bed being lazy. Sound fair?"

Deseem nodded. "I'll start the water, I think I would like to wash my husband."

Liam rolled them a little so that Deseem was slightly below him and he liked that the amber eyes were bold enough now to really look at him. "Fill the tub with cold water. I'll heat it. We'll wash and soak together. If you'd like?"

"I would." Deseem nodded. Liam lowered down but instead of kissing his mouth he kissed the tip of Deseem's nose and it made him smile at the oddly tender gesture as his husband slipped from the bed to find clothing.

Liam moved easily across the bedroom to retrieve his robe, a soft thing that he tended to only wear in winter if at all. Unlike most people, he had no worry of ever really being cold or wet in a chilled room but a robe for modesty occasionally had it's uses. The last thing he wanted was to step into the main room, naked and reeking of sex and scare some poor maid to death.

So he pulled the cloth around his body and yawned. He wouldn't have pushed their run so hard or long if he'd known there would be better ways to be tired enough to sleep waiting for him. In truth he hadn't expected anything to occur with Deseem, even with Lach's teasing truths. He knew he was doomed when he was braced to be angrily accused of being an absent and cold, cruel husband and instead had been defended by a boy that still wasn't sure he should or could defend himself. He'd needed Deseem in that moment desperately and when he'd first kissed the other man he had expected it to be a quick encounter like in the coach or shower. A bit of touch, maybe exchanged, maybe if Deseem would let him he could have pinned the boy to the door and slipped under his dress to kiss his legs and length until they'd both been satisfied.

Only Deseem had unbraided his hair and he'd discovered that the younger man wore nothing under the layers of dress. It had triggered something in Liam, something that hungered and needed, something that was sick to death of being lonely and alone. With Deseem encouraging him, he had nothing left within him to try to stop. He wanted Deseem, Deseem wanted him, they

both were lonely. It had been good even if unplanned.

He yawned again as he shuffled out into the main room. Baxter lifted a head and tilted it. The dog wasn't spoiled enough to actually pout at being kept from the bedroom, but he did like the freedom to come and go as he liked. "That's a boy." Liam whispered around another yawn. It wasn't like Baxter hadn't seen him having sex before, and Liam sometimes wondered if the dog didn't like his lovers because he thought they were hurting him.

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Chapter Sixty

Dinner wasn't waiting for them on the table. Liam stopped and blinked at it for a moment and almost laughed at what he saw. There was wine, yes, but not table wine. Instead they brought honey wine which was generally served for celebrations and had strong romantic overtones. Food was not waiting, but there were round rolls of bread and honey butter and jam in a small crock nearby. With it was a small note that dinner had been withdrawn until requested, but a moment's notice could have a proper meal brought.

That meant that dinner had arrived while they were occupied. Deseem hadn't exactly been silent and his moans and cries would have easily given away what they were doing. The servants had heard and taken their regular food with them and brought back the small tray of lighter fare. More so, the appearance of honey wine was a strong clue that they approved of what they overheard. He would be shocked if dinner, when sent for, wouldn't turn out to be a display of foods considered aphrodisiacs. There were few secrets that could be kept from a palace servant and Liam had long since gotten used to the idea.

He tucked the small tray under an arm and wandered back into the bedroom. Deseem's dress, now nothing more than loose fabric, fluttered forgotten on the floor. He put the tray on the dressing table and scooped the cloth up. Deseem may or may not be ready to stop wearing dresses, but Liam doubted the other man wished the cloth dragged off to line Baxter's bed. He didn't worry about the parts of his uniform dropped across the room, Baxter would leave them be and if not they were sturdy things. He'd smelled of worse things than dog before and gotten it out of the cloth.

With the silks properly saved, he took up the tray again and wandered into the bathing room. The tub was running and filling with cold water and Liam put the tray of wine and bread down on a small table near it. It was a good thing he'd set it aside, because Deseem under the shower, wet with this hair sticking to him, was enough to distract him. Amber eyes peeked open and caught him watching, which made Liam toss his robe aside and Deseem smile in a small wicked way.

He turned the water on the tub off so it wouldn't over fill and stepped under the hot stream from the shower. Deseem moved a little to the side but stayed close to him and Liam found his mind

wandering, thinking about the things two men could do in a shower together. It was made worse by Deseem soaping up a wash cloth and very deliberately scrubbing his back while he soaped up his hair. He wasn't sure he was up to further encounters so soon, or even if Deseem meant the contact in anything other than a friendly way. For all he knew the boy had been taught that a wife should bathe her husband and it was merely a service he hadn't been allowed to offer until now.

"The servants knew we wouldn't be ready for dinner," Liam finally said to break the silence. "They most likely know everything that occurs in these rooms."

"I don't mind," Deseem answered as he cupped water and used it to rinse bubbles from the scarred back. "In Bastion? It's not uncommon to have an attendant in the room while a husband is with his wife."

Liam chuckled. "I would have been an awful Bastion husband."

"Just as I have been a poor excuse for a Corena wife." Deseem ran his fingertips over the faded scars. "Why did you have the Healers keep these?" Soap bubbles followed his fingers creating counter lines to the pale marks.

"What was done..." Liam spoke carefully because it wasn't something he could easily fit into words. "Had to leave a scar. I needed it to leave its mark on me. I couldn't let them wash it all clean. I..."

Deseem's hands flattened over Liam's back. "I understand." He hadn't meant to make his husband sad but it seemed like an important thing to ask. It was something he'd wanted to know. "May I put oil in the bathwater?"

Liam turned to meet the eager eyes. "Of course." He shook his hair out under the shower and let the water wash him clean.

"It's still cold," Deseem reminded him as he stepped away to find the bottle he liked and to pour a generous amount of the lightly scented oil into the chilled water. "Oh... not anymore." He smiled and glanced over his shoulder to where Liam was still rinsing soap off. "This bathing tub is small."

"Small?" Liam shut off the shower and moved to the tub that could easily hold three, four if they really tried.

"The bathing pools from home..." he caught himself. "From Bastion, they fill a room. Attendants would bathe me and wash my hair and scent my skin with oils... I think I like the smaller tub better." He stepped into the water and curled up at one end, knees drawn up in front of him to make room.

Liam stepped in carefully, heating the water a little more and settled in on the opposite side. "Do you mean to stay all the way over there?" He asked.

"I didn't wish to assume."

He motioned with his hand and Deseem moved quickly through the water. Liam's legs were parted and he slipped between them as his husband guided him to lean back against his chest. Pillowed there, in the scented hot water that they sunk into together up to Deseem's chin, he thought the smaller tubs were the best idea ever.

"Wine?" Liam whispered into the silent room.

Deseem shook his head no and his fingers dug a little into Liam's side. He didn't want food or drink, he just wanted to be allowed to stay there, curled against his husband's chest, soaking in

hot water. He felt safe there, comfortable and really warm and soothed for the first time in far too long.

That was all fine and good for Deseem but Liam wanted some wine. He reached over the dark head and managed to pour some out without spilling the whole bottle. It took a thread of magic to chill the drink down but when he was finished it was sweating beads of condensation on the outside of the ceramic goblet and chilling his hand. He sipped at the cool wine and petted Deseem's damp hair as muscles he hadn't know he was holding tense relaxed. His mind drifted in a haze of warmth, comfort and the glow of really amazing sex.

"Husband?"

The soft whisper snapped Liam awake. He wasn't quite dozing but he was in shut down mode where he was still awake but numb, meditative. It was a good way to rest during the war without actually resting or when time was limited. "Hmm?" He shifted in the water and sipped his wine.

"I don't mind that you love Norlan and not me, just, please, allow me this?" He pressed tighter to the warm body he was resting against to make his meaning clear.

That shook any groggy half asleep soothed feeling right out of him. He sighed and put his wine down. "It's not you, Deseem. I'm not... I don't have a heart left." He was numb now and had been since the war. Whatever part of him that had been there to let people in before had died and he had no desire to resurrect it. "They cleansed you and left you damaged? I'm damaged too," he admitted. The wine wasn't as cold in his hand as he took it back up and downed a long swallow. "But, no matter what old feelings I have for Norlan, or what he and I have had before? You are my husband and you are first in my life. I'm sorry I haven't been acting that way."

There was no way Deseem believed that Liam had no heart left but he wasn't going to ruin the wonderful night by debating the issue. "All I wish is this, if I'm allowed this I'm happy."

Liam had to remind himself that Deseem didn't need pity but the boys small request about broke his heart. "Happy and prune." He raised a hand from the water and showed the wrinkles on his fingertips. "We should get out." Deseem's hands tightened on him again. "Don't worry, I promised, we can laze in bed, we can even eat dinner there if you wish."

"I do." Deseem moved in the tub and finally gave up his spot curled against Liam. "I've never been allowed to do that, just linger in bed. I've always had things to do and learn, eat at this time, bathe at this..." He slipped away to the far side of the tub. "I've been enjoying not being told what to do with every minute of every day. At least now that I'm not caught trying to be perfect." Deseem glanced down unable to continue to meet the steady, serious look in Liam's eyes. "I was pretty bad wasn't I?"

"You couldn't help it."

"It feels like a dream, when I try to remember it now. It feels like I've been asleep. As if it weren't actually me..." He lifted his hand from the water and the red V shaped mark on it caught his eyes. "I still don't feel like myself. I'm not sure even who that is supposed to be. I was fourteen when my father said I was to be Bentan."

"That's why I've wanted to give you some space. I want you to learn who you are here and now without being caught in this silliness of being my wife as your identity. I don't want to influence that, I want you to have the freedom that should have been yours from the start." He leaned forward a little to drag his hair from the water to wring out the most of the water before he stood up. The oil Deseem added to the bath made everything slick but it was light enough that he didn't mind it lingering on his skin. It did mean he'd have to towel dry his skin just to get the excess off. Only when he had almost dried off he noticed Deseem still lingered in the tub, half curled up in one corner with his eyes lowered. "Hey, you okay?"

Deseem wasn't sure he was but he nodded. He wasn't to be a priest and his husband didn't wish a traditional bride. So much of his life had been consumed with those two ideas that he had no clue what he was supposed to be now. When he glanced up Liam offered a hand to help him out of the cooling bath water and it occurred to him that he didn't have to be a bride. He could be a good husband and that would be enough for now.

Liam woke up the next morning slowly. He was warm and in a soft bed and naked. That was an unusual occurrence in recent years but a nice one. Even nicer was being curled around another warm body, his hand on a flat naked stomach, his leg tossed over someone else's, his chest pressed and leaning against someone's back. They were naked too, spooned inside of his arms and that made him sigh happily. The other body's hand moved, slid out and over Liam's own and a metal band caught briefly on his own ring.

That small catching of ring to ring snapped Liam from happy sleepy unawareness to wakefulness. He was naked, in bed, curled around his naked husband. He opened his eyes and the dim light of day seeped into their bed enough for him to see masses of thick black waves over their pillows but Liam was nuzzled below, against the slender neck. Gently, he pressed a soft kiss to that exposed column. It was a tender gesture, not one he'd normally give to someone he was just sharing pleasure with. He soothed his conscious by telling himself he did it because Deseem deserved tenderness given the cold emptiness of his life before marriage.

"m husband..." Deseem muttered sleepily. The hand curled over Liam's tightened and fingers threaded together.

There was some little squirming wiggling from the younger man and Liam loosened his grip a bit to let the other man slip away. Only Deseem didn't slip away but wiggled his way further back, tighter to Liam's chest. He pulled Liam's arm back around his own body and sighed happily.

"Husband?" Deseem asked softly.

"Hmm?"

"Is this what our first days wed would have been like if I had not been so damaged? Tucked together, warm, staying a-bed and doing nothing but sharing pleasure?"

Liam wasn't sure he would have been able to let himself be so snuggled and content with a stranger from Bastion but those first days would have been a lot less tense and unhappy. "Maybe, maybe not. I..." he sighed. "It takes me a little while to be comfortable around new people. I might have held us apart simply because of that."

"Still, I'm sorry I was so damaged and ruined that time. I wish we'd spent every day together like this. I ache for even the simplest of my husband's touch."

The happy warmth in Deseem's still sleepy voice made Liam feel like he was doing something wrong. It wasn't fair or right because he didn't love the other man, not beyond casual friendship, but it sounded very much like Deseem did care for him. Liam was right, Deseem was emotionally invested in him and Liam knew he was a poor caretaker of that trust.

"Deseem..." He wanted to try to explain and wasn't sure what words to use.

One side effect of having struggled to be the perfect wife was that Deseem knew his husband. He knew that tone of voice and he knew what it meant. His mind darted across the reasons and fell right back on the largest issue that remained between them. He squirmed again and managed to turn inside the sheltering arm so that he could face his husband.

Not surprisingly, Liam's face was already taking on the blank, cynical distance he always wore when facing the outside world. That cold mask kept everyone away but Deseem had seen behind it. He reached up a hand and brushed stray white hair back. Liam frowned a little more at seeing the contented half smile Deseem wore.

"I am not a Corena bride, my husband."

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Chapter Sixty One

"You aren't a bride, either."

Deseem shook his head. "Just words," he dismissed. "I am Bastion. I am a child of the Guiding Star of Bastion. I was to be a gift to God but I became Bentan. We do not wed for love or emotion. The concepts of romance and romantic love are the things of ideals, but no child of Bastion expects such in their life or marriage." He didn't miss the skepticism in the blue eyes. "It is not something I feel a lack of. I do not expect, nor have I ever expected, my husband to care for me or love me. The most a bride or Bentan hopes for is kindness, gentleness and care, but even that is not expected. You are Corena and not Bastion and I know you do not view marriage as such."

"How would you know that?"

"I have asked Watcher Bishick. We've spoken on the subject. He says Corena men and women marry for love and make a worship of romantic love."

The tone Deseem used made it sound like he was talking about something unbelievably stupid and it made Liam grin a little in spite of himself. "Did he now?"

Deseem nodded. "I am Bastion. Allow me this...this tenderness and you have given me more than I ever dreamed of from a husband. Love who you will, husband, without guilt toward me, just give me this and I am fulfilled."

"You can't mean..." but Liam's protest was stopped but fingertips pressed to his lips.

"I am Bastion and you are my husband." He still saw doubt in the blue eyes. "Be kind to me, as you have from the moment we wed and asked a Healer to fix the cut on my hand, and allow us this contact of the marriage bed. That is more than I dared hope for." He smiled a little and dropped his eyes, not really trying to be coy but finding the gesture fitting. "I never would have dreamed I would wish to lay here, naked, with my husband all day."

"Only we don't have all day," Liam reminded him. "I want you to be happy."

"I am."

"Now you are, just..." Liam had to close his eyes because he knew full well that sooner or later just being treated kindly and given physical pleasure wouldn't be enough. "It's enough for now. Just know I want you to be happy."

"Yes, my husband."

"Deseem I asked the palace tailors to make you some clothes for the winter, but I asked them to make them for a man. I was kind of hoping you'd give in and wear them for warmth instead of the dresses but if you'd prefer..."

"No, no I'll put the dresses away. If that is what my husband would prefer."

"I would, but the choice is yours."

"I would like to try."

Liam smiled. "Good, I'll have them send them over." He ran his hand over the masses of dark hair and shook his head. There was no way he could delay the day long enough for another romp, but his body was whispering that there was always time when faced with so much golden skin and dark hair. "You'll come to dinner with us tonight? At Lach's? It'll just be Bekka, Norlan, Lach and us."

The idea frightened him but Deseem pictured Liam with Norlan alone and it made him feel a little possessive. It was his place by Liam's side and he wasn't willing to surrender it quite so easily. "I will try."

"Good! If you're uncomfortable we'll see you get home safe."

"Thank you."

The earnest words made Liam lean forward and kiss the younger man. Deseem's lips instantly parted and somehow Liam found himself half on top of him. One kiss became a half dozen and Deseem soon was pulling him further on top of him.

"Mmm I've got to go to work..." Liam sighed and tried to back away.

The thought of Liam just leaving made Deseem a little desperate and he was surprised by how forceful it made him feel. It had been so long since he'd expected anyone around him to bend to his will that he'd forgotten how that felt. Now that he was reminded of it, he didn't want to be meek and submissive.

A hand, slender but surprisingly strong, caught the back of Liam's neck and held him in place. Deseem's other hand fisted into his hair and it surprised him so much he didn't know what to say or think.

"I'm sorry, my husband, you're going to be late to work."

"I am?"

Deseem smiled and raised his eyes. "Yes, you are."

The look in the amber eyes made him shiver. "I am." He agreed.

"This is okay?" Deseem asked and had to smooth out the new clothing he now wore. The style wasn't quite Bastion or Corena but had elements of both. The embroidery was lacking and he found part of his mind planning on redoing it properly but over all it was a very nice compromise. The legs of the pants weren't the more narrow straight version of most of Corena but fuller like casual court clothing from Bastion. It was decidedly masculine and even with a length of fabric wrapped lightly around his double braided hair, it still made him uneasy.

"You look wonderful." Liam had even had proper shoes made for the boy instead of the thin, light slippers he'd tended to wear. He could go out into the snow in his new footwear without worry. "Does it feel odd?"

"Yes, my husband. I feel...." He struggled for the word. "Immodest."

That made Liam laugh outright. "After this morning, pants are the least thing to shock me with immodesty." He'd found his mind drifting back to Deseem during the day. It wasn't a distraction but something his thoughts continued to trip over when he least expected it. His husband's surprising boldness that morning and the quick exchange of moaning, hungry touch they'd shared, had pleased him on a level deeper than physical.

Deseem lowered his eyes at the reminder of the last day but he didn't blush. "Perhaps they will inspire further immodesty tonight?"

The hushed comment, whispered in Bastion, did make Liam blush. "We'll see." He took Deseem's hand in his own. "Ready?"

It was a huge step to take. His comfort, his safety was confined to their rooms. Deseem was comfortable there and knew he wouldn't be harmed there. Even before he was declared Bentan he'd never socialized and certainly had never been to a dinner with friends and family. He was content in his small little world but it was important to Liam that he push beyond that.

Because it was important to Liam and his own lingering possessiveness over Norlan, Deseem nodded. "Husband?" He paused as Liam began to lead him out the door that led to the palace.

"Yes?"

"I'm sorry in advance for being an embarrassment to you in front of your family."

That stopped Liam in his tracks and he turned, leaving Deseem standing in the doorway with serious eyes. "Deseem, tonight? This is those dearest to me. Lach and Norlan? Bekka now too, they're good people. They like you and want to be your friend if you'll let them. You can't be an embarrassment to me in their eyes or mine. The rest of my family and Court? Well, I'm not even very welcomed by them and as such I don't care if you do something that isn't proper manners with them. So really, you've nothing to be sorry for or worried about. Okay?"

He nodded but still followed Liam nervously. The new clothes were more comfortable and he felt more like himself in the masculine style. It just didn't seem to matter, each time they passed someone, even a servant, Deseem braced himself to be stopped and questioned. When all they did was stop, bow a little and smile warmly at them both it made him feel even more uneasy. It didn't seem right that no one cared that he was dressed as a man, holding another man's hand, openly.

It surprised Deseem how far they had to travel across the buildings to reach their destination. When they finally stopped in front of a door, he was certain he couldn't find his way back through the maze of connected hallways and buildings to reach their rooms. That made him a little nervous but only a little because Liam was with him and that meant it was okay.

Liam knocked and it took a second but the door opened. Inside the room was laughter and light spilled out into the hallway but Deseem couldn't see into the actual room. Lach answered, in a uniform the same as his brother but with ties loosened and things untucked.

"Hey!" He smiled warmly and tossed his arms out. "Was wondering where you were." Lach pulled Liam into a hug with a bright smile. Backs were patted before the brothers stepped apart and Lach really caught sight of Deseem following slightly behind his brother. The pants and masculine clothing caught him off guard and if it weren't for the brightly colored veil and amber eyes he wasn't sure if he'd instantly have known who it was. "Deseem, I'm so glad you came along."

Deseem ducked his head a little. "Thank you, for inviting me." He said carefully in Trade. He'd worked a good bit of his lessons during the day to say several phrases as clearly as he could manage and he'd hoped it would pay off.

The clothing combined with the words said in Trade and the very fact that the boy stood outside his door made Lach glance to his brother. He thought he saw less tension in the lanky shoulders but he wasn't going to accuse Liam of resolving some of the issues of the marriage bed with Deseem standing right there. "You are most welcome." Lach managed to answer with only a short pause. "Come in, please."

For a moment his feet stuck in place and the idea of entering the strange set of rooms to have dinner with people not his husband made his stomach knot up. It felt like an old habit, one he should have grown out of and hadn't quite managed to. Liam's hand slipped from his own and rested for a second on his shoulder. He glanced up to meet blue eyes and saw nothing malicious in them. The people in the room were the ones his husband cared the most about and he wanted Deseem to be part of that. He wasn't going to snub that because it made him nervous.

With a steadying breath he made himself step forward and follow Liam into the room. It was larger than their own and well lit. The table was able to sit eight or ten easily and with it only set for five there was plenty of room. Norlan hovered near it, pouring wine from a bottle into crystal glasses and Bekka was laughing as she placed platters of steaming food from a wheeled cart onto the table.

"Finally my baby brother arrives." Lach teased. "And look who's here?"

The laughter stopped for a second and Deseem felt eyes resting on him. If it wasn't for Liam's hand gently placed on the small of his back he might very well have turned and left. "Thank you, for inviting me." He repeated again and dared to glance up.

Bekka stood with the tips of her fingers pressed over her lips and when their eyes met her face lit up in a smile. "Oh, Deseem, you look wonderful! I'm so glad you came tonight! It just wouldn't have been the same without you." She moved quickly over and hugged the younger man before he could stop her. Liam quietly translating for her, knowing that Bekka had a tendency to talk too fast and that would make it even more difficult for Deseem to pick out words he knew.

"Thank you." He muttered back as she hugged him. It made him tense to be so casually touched.

Bekka moved from Deseem to Liam, throwing her arms around him and pressing a kiss to the side of his face. "And you... had to be dramatic and late."

"We're not late." Liam protested.

"He's right, I was early." Norlan's eyes slid from Liam to Deseem and his smile warmed a little more. "It's good to see you again." He greeted in accented Bastion.

He didn't drop his eyes and he didn't look away. "Thank you." He answered carefully but he hoped the older man would see the challenge in his eyes. He must have failed because instead of the older man's smile faltering, it warmed up even more.

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Chapter Sixty Two

Dinner wasn't nearly as painful as Deseem had expected. The food was quite good and while conversation drifted and flowed around him, Liam translating softly so he could understand, he wasn't forced to take part. Norlan told stories of his travels and of people Deseem didn't know, but even in translation they were amusing and while he didn't laugh, he did find himself smiling a little at being surrounded by everyone else's laughter.

"Really, Deseem, you have to come to court with me one day soon. Everyone has been whispering about how Liam keeps you locked up all day. There was even a rumor that you'd run away and no one was able to find you to bring you back," Bekka eventually teased.

Deseem waited for Liam to finish translating and he knew his eyes must have gone wide. "I would never..."

"It's okay." Liam soothed. "She just means people were gossiping, but nothing was meant by it."

"Should I to Court?" he asked in Trade as best he could.

Bekka shrugged. "It's assumed the spouse of a member of the royal family will make an occasional appearance. Unless they're a Watcher as well, but none of these boys went that route. Really, it's up to you. Liam's never been one to be social so no one will find it odd if you are just as unsocial. Court is only formally an hour long, but they rest of us linger and gossip for a while after. I'd be happy to go with you if you wish to attend sometime."

Deseem was pleased that he picked up far more words than he expected to, and it was enough understand the basics of what she said. Just in case he was wrong he waited for Liam to translate before he nodded. "Thank you." He said in Trade but turned to Liam. "I can't right now...I....this alone is nearly too much..."

"There's no rush. It's meant to be a social thing. I wouldn't have you going if you dreaded it. I'm not really connected to Court, so there is little expectation of you attending." He glanced to his family and quickly explained Deseem's hesitation.

"You can't be any more uneasy attending than Liam was as a boy." Lach laughed. "When he was little? He used to run and hide to avoid having to stand and look serious for events."

Liam translated but shook his head. "I hate being stared at, always did."

"Everyone stared because your ears stick out."

He reached up and checked. "They do not."

Lach only raised an eyebrow. "They did when you were a kid."

"Well, so did yours."

"His still do!" Bekka teased and brushed at Lach's hair. He laughed and batted her hands away.

"Peace woman! Leave my ears alone!" He batted some more before she settled down. "Our ears stuck out because Mother was always catching us by them and dragging us back to do what we'd been told."

"That's because you were naughty."

"We were perfect children," Lach lied and received more teasing from his wife.

Deseem just sat and watched. Shocked by the casual ease between the pair and how they treated each other with such warmth. There was no doubt that Lach considered his wife an equal, friend and ally and not just as someone to tend to his household and provide him with children.

"Any trouble I got into was entirely Liam's fault!"

"Mine? I seem to remember it the other way around. I was happy being left alone, it was Lach that thought up trouble."

"Now that I believe!" Norlan added. "Liam would have been too busy hiding his nose in a book to get into trouble."

"I wasn't that bad."

Lach snorted a protest. "You're still that bad."

"I am not. I've been busy, you know... fighting smugglers and taking apart storms and powerful, active things."

Norlan laughed and stood up. "With books in your saddlebags I'm sure. Cards, we need to play some cards..."

"We played cards." Bishick repeated in both Bastion and Trade and broke each word's meaning down.

Dutifully, Deseem repeated them. "I won too, even if we weren't playing for anything."

The older Watcher laughed at how the younger man's face lit up. "Still, that's good!"

"It was fun." Deseem confessed with seriousness. "I've never... There was never any time for fun before. There was always so much to learn, so many lessons, and no one to play cards with."

"A Watcher's life may be one of duty and obligation, but we do tend to know how to enjoy things." They'd slipped back into Bastion and for once Bishick wasn't going to scold his student. It was very nice to see Deseem slowly growing into a solid, stable young man.

"I was nervous going but I'm glad I went. Even dressed this way." He waved to his legs under the table and the pants that covered them.

"I think the tailors did a good job. It could be Bastion fashion but it could be Corena as well, and really you'll be much warmer this winter."

"Will it grow colder than this?"

"Quite a bit, and further north more so. My blood is too thin for such weather. My father is still amazed I don't freeze to death here in Corinth, or that any of Bastion blood survives here, let alone so many in the city." He smiled at Deseem's nervous look. "You'll be fine, it isn't so bad." He sighed and shook his head. "Forgive me for saying this, but it makes me feel good to see you smiling."

He was smiling and it hadn't occurred to him that he'd been smiling most of the day. "... That is okay, yes?"

"Yes, very much okay. I just like to think I had some small part in that."

"You have." Deseem quickly assured. "I've never had a tutor be so kind, you haven't struck me once even when I'm being dense. With each word I learn, with each phrase and meaning, I feel more... Well, I feel more like I may belong to this kingdom, this life. I never expected that. I would like to be able to go with my husband to his brother's house and not require him to translate everything so I may understand."

"Soon, you keep studying and soon."

"Watcher?" Deseem asked carefully. His relationship with Bishick seemed sound but he wasn't sure if he should treat the man as a friend, tutor or guard.

"Hmm?"

"My husband's wife was married to another man."

"Norlan, yes."

"My husband was not married to him?"

"No." He wasn't sure what it was that Deseem was hinting at or trying to understand.

"He wished to be, didn't he?"

That was unstable ground. "That would be something you should discuss with Liam."

"My husband loves the husband to his wife and does not love me."

The words were so matter of fact that it took Bishick a moment to understand. The Deseem he'd met would have been unable to process such a complicated situation and certainly wouldn't have been able to vocalize it. "Do you wish he loved you?" He asked carefully and watched how the amber eyes glanced up but drifted out the window to the garden beyond.

"I am his wife, he doesn't have a need to love me."

Even raised with Bastion culture, Bishick knew he'd been just as steeped in Corena culture. Enough so to sometimes be baffled by Bastion ways. "Do you love him?"

It was a bold question. One his sister might have asked him, but certainly not a guard or tutor. Deseem felt himself frowning and wasn't sure if he should call the older man on the informality or not. "I... am his husband. Love has nothing to do with the situation."

"That isn't an answer."

His chest hurt like when he'd learned of his sister's death but not as sharply. "What difference does it make? My husband does not love me."

For a long moment Bishick gathered his thoughts but he kept his eyes down on the book below his hand. "War isn't a good thing, my Prince." He glanced up and caught the steady, too serious, amber eyes. "I knew your husband when he was my student, before he went to war. He was a distant young man, not unlike yourself. Smart, serious, scholarly, but over all he was very gentle. The magic he controls is awe inspiring but he was such a gentle, young man. War changes a soul, there is no room in war for gentleness."

"My husband is a good man," Deseem answered sharply.

"I don't mean to imply he isn't." He sighed and touched the mask pendant around his neck in a habitual reflex he thought he'd long since outgrown. "I am a teacher, that is my strength, but I was sent to the front to help with translation for a time. It's... it's ugly. Two months and I... well, I was glad to be recalled. I didn't ask to be, I would have served as long as my kingdom asked me, but I was grateful to be removed. Liam was there in a far more active role than I ever was and for longer."

There was something about Bishick's face that seemed to be begging for understanding and Deseem wasn't following. "I am not sure I know what you're trying to say."

"War about killed Liam. I don't mean his injuries. The things he had to do, the things he saw? The only way someone as gentle spirited as he was could survive such things is to die a little bit. He lost his wife and everyone knew how deeply he loved her. I believe he's been caught in his mourning, not just for her, but for all that he's lost of himself, and until he heals from those wounds it will be difficult for him to accept new loves and new emotions into his life. I believe Liam doesn't love for the same reason that someone with broken legs doesn't walk."

It wasn't something he'd thought of in just that way. Liam had hinted that he was broken as well but the man's strength was deceptive. It did take what little sting he still felt over Norlan nearly completely away. He glanced over and met Bishick's eyes steadily. "What I have is more than I could have asked for. I am grateful for it and will not ruin what I have wishing for what I can not have."

"What you can not have right now." He corrected and winked. "Now let's get you speaking Trade so that maybe we can move that one day a little sooner."

The steady tapping knock surprised Deseem and he put his book down to hunt out the source. It wasn't from the hall door, the servants tended to knock and come in, and the sound had a tone of glass to it. He moved smoothly through the bedroom and very carefully peeked between the curtains.

"Hi!" Norlan grinned and waved.

The cheerful greeting made Deseem startle a little. "Husband not home."

"I know, I came to see you." Liam was off on his early evening run with Lach. They'd invited him, but Norlan wasn't really a run about sort. He watched the golden eyes narrow a little in suspicion

where they peeked behind the curtain. "I thought we could talk."

It had been nearly two weeks since that night of cards and Deseem hadn't seen the other man once. He'd heard of him, Liam made mention of Norlan stopping in or sending word or going to visit Court. Since Deseem almost never left their rooms, he hadn't seen the older man. He frowned deeper at the request.

"I have no words to say," he answered.

"Aww come on, let's walk in the gardens? I'd really like to say a proper hello to you."

He didn't want to be rude to someone he knew was important to his husband, and really it could cost him nothing to spend a few moments in the public garden with the other man. "Wait," Deseem answered crisply and stepped back from the door. He gathered his cloak and wrapped the veil around his hair and drew a steady breath.

Norlan waited as he'd been told but he bounced his weight from foot to foot. Liam hadn't said not to talk directly to his new husband, but he hadn't suggested it either. From what he'd learned from gossip since his arrival, Deseem was fragile, maybe less so now but still fragile, and Liam tended to be protective of that. When the door cracked open and the slender boy stepped out into the cool air Norlan found himself staring. Deseem's eyes were so proud, so strong and his face so set and, the only word his mind would provide, regal, Norlan had to squash the desire to bow slightly.

Instead he smiled brighter. "Thank you."

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Snowflakes and Embers

Chapter Sixty Three

"What is it you want?" Deseem asked in slow, careful, accented Trade.

"Please, it's a lovely day." He waved to the garden. "I know some Bastion so between the two we should make ourselves understood. Yes?"

Deseem nodded and followed several paces to the side of the older man.

"I've always been happiest outside. Not really an indoor sort of man." He glanced over to where Deseem walked, eyes steadily forward. "Baxter really likes you."

"He a dog."

"Yes but he's a smart dog and he loves Liam and he's very protective of him. It says a lot about

you that he loves you as well. I have animal empathy you know? I can't speak in words to him but I know what he thinks of you being part of his pack. He likes how long you're willing to pet his ears and throw his stick." Deseem didn't seem willing to comment further on that and Norlan let the subject drop. He wasn't in the mood to wander aimlessly around the garden and guided them to one of the benches.

Deseem gingerly sat on the far side of the bench.

"Liam gave me our wife's shaman belt. He explained some of how you came to keep it. I'm sorry your father tried to use it to shame you. Dorena, she wouldn't have liked that. In any case, I'm grateful to have it returned. Liam told me that in her final hours she had asked me to have it." He glanced to his hands, all the grins faded now. "She was an extraordinary woman. You would have liked her. I know she would have adored you. I think sometimes that's why I loved her so dearly. She had this depth to her, she was able to love people for who they honestly were without trying to alter them. Do you understand?" It almost felt better to think he spoke and Deseem wasn't understanding the words.

"Most." Deseem answered carefully.

Norlan made a point to look over and catch Deseem's eyes. "I'm no threat to you."

Deseem snorted a little.

"Seriously, I'm not."

"Husband loves you, not me."

"I am not a man to speak indirectly. I tend to pretty much say what I think. I think you care for Liam."

"He is my husband."

"I mean beyond duty." He held up a hand. "I don't need you to answer me, it's enough that I believe you do. I'd like to help you win him."

"What?"

"Liam isn't a simple man and I've known him for years. I'd like to be able to speak with you, to be your friend, to help you understand him. I believe you are smart enough and care enough about him to use that knowledge to wake him up and build a life with him." He saw uncertainty in the golden eyes.

"You help me...win...husband love?"

"Yes." He sighed.

Deseem sat studying the ground for a long moment before he stood up. "Tomorrow, after lunch meal, come return, we talk."

Norlan heard the dismissal in the other man's voice and he hopped to his feet. "Okay, tomorrow then."

Deseem only nodded and walked on steady, long strides back to his rooms.

Deseem was pacing when Bishick arrived and the Watcher entered the room with care. "My

Prince?" He asked respectfully.

"Watcher...I..." Deseem rubbed his eyes in obvious unease.

"What is it? How can I help?"

"Before I wed, you translated for my mother the Queen."

"Yes."

"Do you often translate sensitive things that you must keep silent?"

"Yes."

"I require that service today. I'm not strong enough in Trade yet and I need to understand."

Bichick nodded and moved further into the room. "I am at your service, my Prince."

"My husband... I..." Dessem sighed and stopped pacing. "Norlan came to see me, to speak to me. He has offered to help me understand my husband better so that I might...might be a better spouse."

"Okay."

"It is too important to chance to a misunderstanding of words alone but..."

"But he may speak of things that are private to Liam, Norlan or yourself, things you'd wish not known."

"Yes."

He bowed his head a little. "I'm honored to so hold your trust."

"Thank you. I wasn't certain it was proper to involve you but..."

"But it is too important to risk to misunderstanding."

Deseem nodded. "Am I being a fool?"

"Love is never foolish. Liam wishes you and Norlan to be friends and friends speak and share with one another." Bishick shrugged. "A wise man never asks two lovers to be friends while expecting them not to speak of him."

"Thank you."

There was only a short wait until a knocking came at the garden door and this time Deseem didn't approach it with the same uncertainty. As soon as he saw it was Norlan outside he pushed back the curtain and waved him in. "Please, in, in..."

"Liam home?"

"Husband work."

"Good." He wasn't sneaking behind Liam's back, not by any means but he'd have preferred to speak with Deseem alone. Only they weren't alone and Norlan stepped into the main room and glanced between the strange Watcher and his host.

"Explain to him, please, so he understands?" Deseem asked in Bastion and moved to pour tea for all three of them.

As carefully as he could he explained and hoped that Norlan would understand. The older man listened and nodded.

"You're comfortable with this?"

Bishick shrugged. "I've heard worse as a translator, I think I can deal with a love triangle."

Norlan smiled again. "Well than I'm glad to have you here. A misunderstanding is the last thing I want. So I should stick to Trade and not try to butcher Bastion?"

"That'll work." Bishick accepted his cup of tea from Deseem. "Thank you, he understands. You speak Bastion, he'll speak Trade, I'll translate between."

"Thank you." Deseem waved to a chair for Norlan and waited until the other man sat down before he took his own seat. "You asked to speak, I am listening."

"Yes..." Norlan glanced to Bishick. "I met Liam when he was fourteen and in his first year of training to be a Watcher. He looked like a child, a very serious child. He'd known for years that he was to wed a Shaman but had only met Dorena the year before. He was mature enough to suggest she wed me first even before he met me. I don't think Liam ever had a chance to be a child, not the way he should have had. You see, magic runs strongly in his family and they checked him at twelve and saw no sign of his having any. When they looked a year later they told him he could, maybe, develop mild firestarting. There was an accident just before his fourteenth birthday. Liam and Lach were on a rooftop and Lach fell eight stories and landed with only a broken arm and some scrapes and bruises. Liam had reached out with his magic, without knowing what he was doing and saved his brother but it put him into a state of shock. It took a half dozen Watchers of various talents to control him and when he'd recovered everyone was suddenly frightened of him."

"Because of his being an Elemental?"

Norlan nodded. "There hasn't been one in many, many generations. It was thought to have been a type of legend, not a real magic talent. Then suddenly over night this already odd duck child has this talent? It scared the piss out of most people. By the time I met him he'd spent a year with people looking sideways at him."

Deseem folded his hands around his tea. "People already stared because of his hair."

"Sadly, yes. He didn't want to care for Dorena and didn't want to care about me either." Norlan chuckled. "He really was a difficult boy to get to know, all prickly and proud, too quick to assume he was being mocked when he wasn't and way, way too used to keeping his thoughts to himself."

"The summer he spent up in the mountains with us before he was sent to the front? He said it was the happiest he'd ever been and all we did was love him and welcome him as our family. Dorena didn't want him to leave, she knew what war would do to him but he was ordered to leave and he left." Norlan rubbed at his eyes and shook his head. "We got letters from him, sometimes. They were so...bleak. So sterile and washed clean, so closed off and painful to read. So lonely..."

The pain in Norlan's eyes was as sharp as what he was used to seeing from Liam and Deseem felt guilty again. "I'm sorry I was not able to do more for your wife."

"Oh, thank you but, you did more than I could have prayed for. You allowed her to die free, that means the most to my people. It's just...we would have lost Liam if she hadn't joined him on the

front. How do you ask a man which of those he loves to lose? I expected neither of them to return." He sipped his tea to wash the bitterness from his mouth. "She sent me a letter. She said Liam was a mess, that he was barely sleeping, that there wasn't enough food and supplies were often late arriving. She said out of battle Liam was a walking shell held together with self hate and tension but in battle he was like some mythical monster. She said her goodbyes in a letter and when I got it I started down from the mountains. I don't know I... I thought if I were here, in Corinth, closer to Liam's family...all it did was have me arrive sooner when they dragged Liam home."

"He was badly wounded when... he escaped."

"When you freed them. Yes, he was, more so when he reached friendly hands. Infection and blood loss and badly healed wounds, half starved to death and dehydrated... even when he got back here to Corinth he was in sad shape. It wasn't his physical wounds, Deseem, for all his quiet, bookish ways, he really is a very tough man. He was paranoid and on edge. He had to be drugged to sleep and then he refused to eat or drink because of that...he didn't trust any of us. He was mad but most of his violence and hate was directed at himself. I left for a time, I wanted to find him an ally..."

"Baxter."

"Yes. While I was off looking at a friend's pups Liam cut open his wrist. He wasn't breathing when Lach found him. It was months before we were fairly certain that we wouldn't lose him and as soon as he was slightly stable? He took off to ride patrol."

"With Baxter?"

Norlan grinned. "Yeah, the big baby was the best thing I've ever done for anyone. Does me proud to see him so bonded to you too. That's how I knew."

"Knew?"

"That you are right for Liam and more that Liam can be trusted with you. He's a rare gift you know? There isn't another soul like him anywhere, well, expect maybe you? Not the same, his counterpart maybe?"

"No matter your history with him, no matter that he loves you, know I am his husband. I don't care what you do with him, he will come home to me." Deseem spoke with enough force that Bishick actually paused before translating it.

"I'm not kree, Deseem, no matter how much I may care for someone it will never be fully in the way a partner should. There is no future for either of us together, just a reminder of a painful past. Yes, I love him and I'm honored that he loves me but I also love his brother Lach and my friends and family and I hope one day you as well. His future is with you and you've got to make a choice right now, right here. Are you willing to fight for him? Because it isn't me you'll be fighting against but Liam himself. If you are, I'll help you."

Deseem paused and looked to Bishick. "Does he sound sincere?"

Bishick nodded. "He sounds it yes. Is this what you want?"

Deseem nodded. "My future is my husband and he's a man worthy of that faith. Yes." He squarely met Bishick's eyes. "It's what I want."

Deseem may have thought twice about agreeing to accept Norlan's help because the man meant

for them to start right away. He found himself being shooed into the bedroom with both men following him. Norlan quickly started snooping about drawers, dressers and jewelry boxes.

"What you want?" Deseem asked when Bishick looked as confused as he felt.

"I may not be kree but Liam is a sneeze away from it and you, my young friend are stunning to look at. Men lust with their eyes first..." Norlan nodded as he pulled out a sheer silk veil in bright, bold red and heavy with gold embroidery. "Here, and we need to unbraid your hair..."

"What?"

Norlan grinned. "Trust me."

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Story Home

Home

Snowflakes and Embers

Chapter Sixty Four

"This is right?" Deseem asked as he frowned deeper but paused in copying the odd alignment of letters. Most of the words he knew but the letters for Trade were so much blockier than the scrolling fluid script of Bastion. They joined together in square, solid, clunky ways that looked better printed than written with his uncertain hand.

"You're doing fine. It just says 'Husband, went to the library,' and your name." Bishick reassured.

"And he'll follow to find me?"

"Liam will trip over his feet to join you." Norlan grinned. He'd made Deseem unbraid his hair and instead of braiding it all back into two braids as a proper wife would, he convinced the boy to only braid a small section into the twin lengths. He was still doing what was proper, he was wearing two braids but Norlan knew how attractive it would be to see so much wavy, silky black hair loose and only being held back by the dark red silk.

"I'm not sure..."

"Trust me."

Deseem sighed. Norlan had lined his eyes, lightly but the black lines were neatly in place and at the older man's request he'd put on the gold bangles on his wrists. He felt he looked too Bastion and too foreign but Bishick had agreed with Norlan and so he'd relented. "It's hours yet until he returns home..."

"I'll see to it he skips his nightly run with Lach, so it won't be as long as normal."

"And I'll see to it you're in the Bastion section, there will be plenty there to just look around at even if you don't want to try to read any of the books. The time will go too quickly." Bishick reassured as well. Norlan's plan was devious and wicked and perfect. He was putting Deseem in the place that Liam liked the most and it couldn't have been more clear if Deseem wore a sign that said he was willing to meet his husband on his husband's terms.

"This will work?" Deseem questioned again as he put the pen down.

"It's a start." Norlan grinned again.

"And once he joins me? Then what?"

"Just be yourself. This is merely stage one of our assault."

"Stage one?"

Norlan patted the younger man's shoulder. "Trust me."

Liam had clutched the paper in his hand the entire walk to the library, half convinced it was a fake or a fraud and something awful had happened to Deseem. If his husband wasn't in the library he'd want the paper with him to take to Lach or someone else with sight to maybe pull clues from. He'd never returned home to find Deseem gone and he'd certainly never found a note from the other man. He had hurried right to the library and hadn't let anyone or anything stop him.

There was no point in asking a librarian if Deseem was drifting about. There were dozens on duty during the day and their shifts varied. Even if someone had seen or helped his husband, they might not have mentioned it to anyone else. If Deseem had written a note and found his way here, he would only be in one place. He assumed that Bishick had helped him get here and Liam hurried up the three flights of stairs and down the main corridor to the section that was shelf upon shelf of books written in Bastion.

He hurried around rows and sections, trying to catch a glimpse of Deseem and not sure he'd even find the man there. He was about ready to give up and go find Lach when he hurried down one row to the center of the building and the tables placed nearest the balcony to catch as much of the natural sunlight as possible.

There was only one person sitting at any of the tables. It took Liam a moment for his suddenly shocked silly mind to know it was Deseem. Red silk floated and mingled around dark hair that had spilled out to tumble a little over a shoulder. Gold flashed in shiny clinking sounds around the slender wrists as Deseem trailed a finger under the line of text he was reading. He was bathed in sunlight, glowing with it, as he sat absorbed in the study of the book he'd selected.

It stopped him in his tracks. One of the most attractive men he'd ever laid eyes on was sitting, reading, in one of his favorite places in the whole world. He'd known logically that Deseem had to have been a studious sort, given his training and history but he hadn't ever really expected to see it. He certainly hadn't ever expected to be married to someone that would, maybe, enjoy and share his love of books and reading as much as he did. Only there Deseem was, lost in his book, surrounded by more books, looking shockingly attractive.

Liam's mind started to whisper about how seldom anyone browsed in the Bastion section and how easy it would be to slip down a forgotten row of books, into some darkened corner. There it would be so easy to molest the slender young man and Liam felt himself blushing at the very thought. Deseem, sex and books, it was an odd erotic mix. Golden amber eyes darted up and Liam knew he was going to blush brighter when Deseem just smiled invitingly at him.

"Husband." He spoke softly and Liam felt himself shiver at the low whisper. "There are so many books."

The sheer innocent wonder in the other's voice made him smile. "Yes. Did you find what you wanted?"

"I have now." Deseem closed the book he'd been reading and stood up. Liam was still just standing there, watching him. "I was never allowed to go to look at books myself. They were always brought to me. This place..." He glanced from cold blue eyes to the massive building around them. "So many stories, so much knowledge... I could spend a lifetime here and not read everything. I wasn't certain Bishick was truthful when he said it was proper for me to be here, it seems...it seems too great to believe."

"You really mean that, don't you?"

The disbelief surprised Deseem but he nodded and moved closer to his husband. "Learning, reading, was all the pleasure I had before your touch. Now that you've returned it to my mind, this place seems a small corner of heaven to me." He boldly met the uncertain blue eyes. "I didn't even know where to begin to look, there is so much."

"I could show you around...unless Bishick did already?"

"No, my husband, he had a class to teach and I would like that very much."

Norlan had always been bored with the library, the man was so much a creature of the outdoors and of motion and action that a massive building of stale books drove him crazy. Liam had been acutely aware that when he'd shown the library to them that Norlan had been itching to get away. Dorena was more patient. She'd taken an interest because it was something he loved and valued but her own education had been handed down with apprenticeships and oral traditions and very little actual book learning. He'd never had a lover beyond them to show his favorites corners of the library to, and he'd never had a lover whose eyes glowed with excitement at being shown. It thrilled him, surprised him and for the first time since he was a child and really understood what a studious little freak he was, made him feel like he might really be understood.

"Good... here, did you want to bring that book home? If not, leave it on this cart here. The librarians will see it's returned properly."

Deseem placed the book he'd been reading down on the mentioned cart and smiled. "Where do we start? Top floor or bottom?" He offered his hand.

It surprised Liam enough that it took a second to sink in that Deseem wanted not only to see the library but to hold his hand while being shown it. "Top, and we'll work our way down." He smiled brightly and took the hand, slender and warm in his own. "Deseem... this... I..." Liam sighed and glanced around him, suddenly feeling awkward and stupid. "Thank you."

"For what, my husband?"

"It's nice... to you know... have someone to share this with."

Deseem hadn't been convinced Norlan was right about his stage one plan until that moment. There was something warm and grateful, open and honest, in the normally cold and distant blue eyes. It seemed like a silly small thing to gain such a look. Deseem wasn't even faking an interest in the library and really did want to explore it. He simply never expected something so simple would reach his husband so deeply.

"It's nice for me as well, my husband."

"Deseem..."

His name echoed across black hazy sleep and gentle hands stroked his face. He muttered a little and rolled away from the soft touch.

"Deseem, can you wake up?"

"Husband? 'm sleepy..." He protested and tugged at the blankets a little.

Liam's soft chuckle drifted over him the same way the man's hands did. "I know but really, you'll want to see this...can you wake up?"

With a heavy sigh Deseem pried his eyes open. The room was lit with several softly glowing lamps and candles but the air outside the covers was cold. Winter had set in during the past few weeks and he wasn't liking it much. "It's cold out there." He frowned. The curtains around the bed had been drawn back and the same had been done to the ones over their garden door. "Have you been out, my husband?" Liam had been as undressed as Deseem still was when he'd fallen asleep but there he sat, dressed fully and wide awake.

"Just for a moment. Can you get up and get dressed? Something warm?" He moved hurriedly from the bed to pull the curtains shut over the doors. "I'll warm the room."

Deseem yawned but moved to wake and dress without further question. Baxter was sitting by the doors, ears alert and happy to be awake. He rubbed at his eyes and moved to dress without thinking about it. His hair was still loose, Liam seemed to prefer it that way when they were alone together. He started to brush it to braid it back.

"It's okay, you won't be going far and really we won't be out long."

"But..." Liam's hair was brushed to fall in a smooth line down his back, stark white against the black and it made him look properly presentable. He placed the hairbrush down with a sigh.

"Don't frown at me!" Liam laughed. "I promise, this is worth getting awake for." He offered his hand to the other young man and Deseem took it without pause.

"Husband..."

"Shhh." Liam soothed and moved them to the garden door but he didn't pull back the curtain. "Close your eyes."

"What?"

"Go on, close them..."

"Husband." He scolded but when Liam wasn't swayed by his questioning, Deseem sighed and closed his eyes. "I will trip."

"I won't let you."

He heard the curtains be pulled back and the garden doors open. A rush of cold air hit his face but he was quickly wrapped in the thin layer of warmth Liam always sheltered him in. Baxter barked happily and brushed past his legs with a great flurry of happy dog motion. Liam's hand urged him to move forward and he did, with slow, uncertain steps.

A few feet from their door, which Liam had paused to close behind them, his boots started to crunch into something. It wasn't the brittle sound of fallen leaves but softer, sharper sounding and Deseem frowned. Something wet and cold hit his face but he didn't hear rain.

"Husband?" Hands fell onto his shoulders and positioned him a little more to his left.

"Okay, open your eyes."

Deseem did, carefully, unsure what to expect and even with his eyes open he wasn't sure what he was seeing. The moon was full and almost directly over their heads but the light was muted as it filtered through low flying, heavy clouds. White was falling, tiny little specks like crystals and slowly he understood it was ice. Ice was falling from the sky to drift down and it had coated everything. Several inches of it were fluffed around his boots. Baxter was leaping across their now white garden, biting at the loose powder.

He held out his hand and watched the small flecks land and melt to rain. "This is..."

"Snow." Liam answered.

Deseem glanced up to where thousands of the small snowflakes were swirling down on a light breeze, caught in the dim slivery moonlight. "Snow."

"It'll melt by morning, this first snow never sticks for long."

"Snow..." It was stunningly beautiful, it made the garden look like some otherworldly landscape all in soft muted silence.

"In a few weeks it'll stay and we'll get far more of it but this is the first snow fall of the year. I wanted you to see it." He'd felt the storm blowing in early that afternoon and had watched it approach for hours. It had nearly gone north of them but sure enough while he was making love to Deseem that night, he felt the first of the snowflakes falling outside.

"So beautiful... and cold." He could feel the chill around him, held away. The melted snowflakes were cold and wet on his skin but he didn't shiver.

"I'll keep you warm," Liam whispered back and watched as the small flakes caught and melted in Deseem's night black hair. They sparkled there like tiny diamonds in the diffused moonlight. Deseem turned and his eyes were like small sparks of fire in the cold winter night. Suddenly, Liam wasn't sure if he meant to keep the other man warm with his magic alone.

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Chapter Sixty Five

"Liam..." His husband looked like he belonged fully to the world of ice and cold and he tried to picture the man in his own homeland. What would he look like surrounded by hot sun and arid plains? Would he be as strikingly handsome there or would he appear out of place? That made him wonder if he looked lost in the winter landscape, since he was born and bred for the dry climate of his homeland and not the beautiful one he stood in. "I never dreamed it would be so beautiful. Am I allowed to touch it?"

The serious question made Liam laugh again. "Of course! Baxter loves the first snow too." He wanted to gather Deseem up in his arms, tumble him down into the snow, touch frost chilled fingers across flesh he'd keep warm with a magical touch. Instead he grinned again and chased after the big dog.

Deseem stood alone on the snow covered pathway. Liam bounded after the dog and when Baxter turned and jumped up they both went tumbling into the new fallen snow. Baxter was the first to recover, he leapt away, barking and shaking snow from his fur as he darted in a tight circle around where Liam was still struggling to stand. When his husband did lift himself out of the snow, his black uniform now damp with melted snow, he shook white hair and sent white snow flicking out into the night sky. With a laugh he scrambled after the happily barking dog.

Carefully, Deseem knelt down and trailed his fingers over the powdery snow. He could feel the cold but it was slow to sink in to his skin past the sheltering layer of warmth Liam had placed around him. It looked like crystals, glittery dust but as his warmth touched it the white powder dissolved to cold water. It was fascinating and he started to trail his fingers into small drawings on the untouched surface.

It would have been a peaceful moment if a wad of the cold white snow hadn't suddenly slammed into the side of his head. Deseem startled so badly he fell back into the snow, his hands fluttered up the loose powder. He scrambled at the side of his head and pulled away clumps of melting snow and still didn't understand until another snowball smacked him in the leg.

Golden eyes darted up and Liam laughed at the surprised shock. He lobbed another small snowball toward his husband, this time with Baxter chasing the projectile. He laughed as Deseem got his hands up and batted it away but he was waiting to see if the other man would understand it was meant to be fun and not some malicious attack. Baxter got in the way for a moment as the large dog hurried over to lick the clumps of snow from the side of Deseem's face.

Before he could clearly see Deseem, a snowball sailed over Baxter and landed with a thump against Liam's shoulder. It was soft and poorly formed, an inexperienced snowball but it was a snowball and Liam laughed again.

"Gah! You got me!" Liam chuckled and scrambled back in the snow to avoid another poorly formed and badly aimed assault. He quickly gathered up snow and compressed it down before lobbing it over the large dog. A wet smacking thump sound followed by a startled cry of surprise as half melted snow found the open collar of a shirt made him smile.

Deseem stood, moving from behind the small shelter of Baxter's wiggling body. The two men faced off, gathering handfuls of snow and tossing them with more enthusiasm than skill toward each other. Liam made sure one hit him squarely on the side of his head and made sure most of his attacks flew wide or caught Deseem on the legs or arms. Soon, Baxter was joining in, running between them, barking in delight while they laughed and trying his hardest to snap the snowballs out of the night air.

With a flurry of snowballs, Liam crept closer. He endured his husband's better close range aim to sweep in and snag a laughing Deseem in his arms. The other man was really laughing too, lightly, freely, with no shy worry or hidden fear and it made Liam laugh more too. Deseem squirmed a little as snow found it's way down his shirt and the motion swung them together,

around, down to fall into the soft few inches of snow blanketed around them.

They rolled together for a moment before Deseem found himself pinned between his husband and the newly fallen snow. His laughter sighed to a stop as damp, white hair fell down over him like a different sort of snow.

"Oh, husband, snow is nice." He grinned up at the now serious face and eyes as cold as the ground below him. He knew that look, knew he was about to be kissed and wondered if they could do more than throw snow at each other out in the cold winter night.

Deseem never found out. Baxter bounded over and began to lick their faces. His strong head butted at them, nudged them to come play or come back inside where it was warm. Liam shook his head and pushed at the dog but Baxter was determined not to be left out.

"Okay... okay, you big baby!" Liam chuckled and slipped away from where he had Deseem pinned below him. "He's such a child sometimes."

"He just wishes to play." Deseem sighed as he sat up and soon had a head pushing at his hands, begging to be petted. "I like hearing you laugh."

The softly confessed words froze Liam. He hadn't been aware of how much he'd been laughing. "I was thinking the same about you. I've never really heard you laugh before."

Deseem reached out with one hand and trailed cold fingertips over Liam's face. "I've never been so happy." He shivered as the cold seeped into his body. "Or so cold!"

Liam nodded and leaned back on his hands to look up at the night sky. The snow was falling in a dizzying pattern of swirls and he blamed that for how off balance he felt. "It is cold, but very lovely."

Deseem's focus went from the snow all around him and chilling him to Liam. With his snow white hair and ice blue eyes and his aloof distance, Liam was very cold but very lovely as well. At least that's what he wanted people to think, to believe, but Deseem had seen fire in those ice eyes and warmth in the winter of his husband's heart. For the first time, he understood what it was Norlan was trying to help him win. It wasn't just about making it so they could live better together but so that they could love each other. He saw it now and it made something sharp and sad fill his heart.

"You're shivering." Liam spoke into the night as Baxter came and nearly sat on him.

"Only a little."

"There will be more snow, I promise." He stood and went to offer a hand to help Deseem stand. "I'll show you how to make a really good snowball and we'll ambush Lach or Norlan."

"I would like that." Deseem laughed again and took the hand and pulled himself from the cold blanketing snow. He shuddered as more cold slipped down his back. "Oh, snow down my back!"

"Let's get you warmed up and back in bed..."

"I'm certain my husband will find a way to warm me in bed." Deseem answered with lowered eyes that didn't miss the blush that crept across Liam's snow pale skin. Seeing that blush made him smile almost as much as throwing snowballs and he ducked his head to hide the grin.

Lach opened his room door and froze. Bekka was sitting at their table, a tea service on the table

in front of her. Sitting across from her was Deseem. His hair loose but for two braids and caught up in a saffron colored veil with silver threadwork embroidery. Even dressed as a boy, Lach was still startled to see such beautiful eyes on a man, the kohl lines that outlined them only intensified them. He could understand Liam's physical attraction to the other young man, even if he didn't necessarily share it.

"Uh oh." He stopped. "Are you unarmed?" Lach teasingly asked.

Deseem smiled and it brightened his eyes but he still glanced down to hide his pleasure. "I am without snowballs, at the moment." He spoke slowly and carefully in Trade. Norlan had been helping him with Trade now as well, filling his days with three formal lessons and he'd asked everyone to speak only his new kingdom's words around him. He was learning much faster that way.

"Good. You and Liam are evil together." He laughed and moved into the room.

"Stay for tea?" Bekka asked as she finished pouring her own cup. "We're just back from Court."

"I would love to but I can't." He hurried into the room and leaned down to press a kiss to his wife's forehead. "I'm just home to change before my meeting with the Senators tonight. Which I can now attend without fear of being ambushed by snowballs on the way there."

"You will be safe, my brother." Deseem spoke above a whisper and smiled brighter at Lach's easy and warm laughter.

"Oh I know it, but trust that I will find some means of revenge soon!" He stepped back. "Where's our son?"

"Visiting with your father at the stables."

"Good, let me go change."

Deseem waited until Lach had disappeared into another room. "You do not tell him where his child is?"

"He trusts I won't let harm come to him. Poor Lach runs around working all day, from dawn until late. If he didn't trust that I could manage things on my own he'd worry himself sick. That's different than a Bastion family, I can see it in your eyes."

He didn't deny it. "I'm trying to understand. Things are so very different."

"Well, you're adjusting well. I'm shocked by your progress and really seeing you and Liam happy together makes me happy too."

"Sister..."

"It's okay, ask me anything. If I were you I'd be bursting with questions."

"You and my brother have a happy marriage?"

"Quite, which is more than I expected. It isn't easy being married to a Watcher and more so to a Prince."

"Yet, you are not submissive?"

That made her laugh. "Goodness no! I'll listen to him as he is my Prince but Lach doesn't want a quiet submissive wife. He could have had his pick of very quiet, very compliant women and yet

he picked me. I'd bet he'd be bored silly if I was some meek little mouse."

"Are most wives...not bending to their husband's will?"

"Deseem, dear, here? There is no rule to marriage. A husband, a wife, the roles are not written in stone. What works for one marriage may not work for another. If you being more submissive to Liam works for you two, that's what matters most. You don't have to try to be like us."

"It's just..." Deseem started but Lach rejoined them, in a fresh uniform slightly more formal than the one he'd changed out of.

"Sorry to interrupt." He moved into the room while straightening the cuffs of his sleeves.

"I do love a man in uniform." Bekka grinned, smiling up at Lach and making him blush a little.

He glanced to where Deseem sat, his amber eyes coldly studying everything like they were some odd bug and the look made him blush a little more. "Later, wench." Lach muttered and leaned down to kiss his wife softly on the lips. "I'll be late for dinner."

"Of course you will be." She smiled indulgently and her eyes followed as Lach left their rooms as quickly as he arrived. "I'm sorry, what were you saying?"

Deseem wasn't sure he should continue. If he was truly a wife, Bekka would be his sister and he would turn to his sisters with such questions. "I want to be pleasing to my husband."

"I'm sure you are. You're very handsome and seem bright."

"I...I think I am tolerated."

"Deseem, trust me, Liam is fond of you."

The words tumbled together as a knot in his stomach, they built up, cramped up and before he could stop them they spilled out. "I want him to love me." They tumbled out with such force he had to gasp for breath and felt lightheaded.

"Oh, easy now, easy, that's it... it's okay...breathe... feel better now that you've said that?"

Deseem nodded dumbly and lowered his face.

"Not an easy thing to admit is it? That you love someone."

"I don't..." but the denial died on his lips. "I don't know what it is to love."

"No one knows what it is to love until they do."

"A wife shouldn't love her husband, she should honor him..."

"You aren't a wife and this isn't Bastion. Honestly, how do you get by the hard times if you don't love your spouse?" She leaned over and patted Deseem's hand, it rested lightly on the table but held so much tension. "It's good that you've found love with him, very good. Treaty marriages are hard enough without affection but if you can find happiness, that's such a gift."

He thought about the snow and laying in the warmth of his husband's arms. "I am happy. I want...I wish for my husband to be happy as well but I am selfish. I want him to be happy because of me, with me."

"Rightfully so."

"It's...this is proper?"

She smiled warmly but with a touch of sadness. "Oh Deseem, it's very proper."

"Norlan has offered to help me." He fussed with his tea. "I wasn't sure it was right."

"You really were cloistered before coming here, weren't you?"

Deseem nodded.

"You poor thing. Well, there's nothing for it, you'll have my help as well and Lach's too if he ever wants a peaceful night's rest again." Her smile brightened at the idea. "I think you're just what Liam needs, whether he knows it right now or not!"

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Chapter Sixty Six

"This is a bad idea." Deseem protested and held in the desire to scream at everyone to leave his rooms.

"It's a perfect idea." Bekka comforted. A knock came from the hallway and she hopped up to hurry over to answer it.

"I have to agree with her." Norlan added in, glancing from Bishick to Deseem. "Actually it's brilliant. I was considering attempting it myself but there is no way Liam would believe it."

"Or worse..." Bishick added. "He'd suggest something."

Norlan and Bekka both laughed as she opened the door but Deseem didn't understand. "Suggest what?" His question only made the snickering deepen a little and he started to feel embarrassed and foolish. The man that swept in from the door Bekka opened was a welcome distraction.

He was younger than Deseem had expected, around Liam's own age. His hair was nearly as dark as Deseem's and his skin had a nice, healthy tan olive glow to it. Eyes the color of rich, deep wood, drew in all attention and distracted from a full, teasing mouth. His clothes were well made, tailored to show off his lean torso and slender legs if just a bit more ornate than the stark black uniforms of the Watchers Deseem had grown so used to seeing. He concluded that the man was handsome, confident and had a clever look about him almost at the same time he concluded that he shouldn't really like the man.

"Bekka, dearest, I swear you're more lovely every time I see you." He announced as he swept in

the room. Instead of bowing to her he leaned in and placed a kiss to either side of her face.

"Flatter, you saw me yesterday." She chuckled.

"Trifles." He brushed reality aside and turned to face the room. This time he did bow, deeply, but he locked his warm brown eyes firmly on Deseem and didn't look away. "My Prince, I am honored to serve."

The look in those eyes made Deseem suddenly feel naked. "Who is this?"

Bekka hurried forward. "Deseem, this is Lord Dugen Failing, a dear friend of mine since we were children."

"We met at Court." Lord Failing added. "I'm certain I was quite forgettable with so many new names and faces but may I say you, My Prince, are unforgettable."

Bekka thumped his shoulder. "Dugen is rather..."

"Notorious." Bishick supplied.

"I prefer infamous." The full lips teased themselves into a smile.

"Notorious around court as being both an excellent representative of his home district but also as being...well..."

"She's attempting to find a nice way of saying that I set the gossips to wagging with my exploits. I see something, or someone, I like and I pursue them, generally to great success. Since I am generally kree, that means mostly very beautiful young men but I have made a few maidens sigh as well." Dugen's voice was a rich mocking tease. "Now, your letter was a bit vague, would you care to explain why I'm here?"

Bekka looked to Norlan who looked to Bishick who was trying not to look at Deseem. None of the men seemed willing to explain. She shook her head. "Contrary to gossip at Court? Deseem and Liam are attempting to build a solid relationship. Deseem is willing, however Liam is..."

"Being himself?" Dugen raised an eyebrow.

"Yes. We three have been trying to give him a push so he sees what's right in front of him."

"He'd be a fool not to."

The warm eyes made Deseem feel flushed but the words sparked his anger. "Do not speak of my husband so." He answered sharply.

Dugen bowed again. "Forgive me, My Price, I didn't mean for it to sound as if I was being snide. I hold a great deal of respect for Watcher Liam."

"We were thinking..." Norlan continued. "If someone with a bit of a history were seen in contact with Deseem, it might be a good nudge for Liam."

Dugen glanced around the room unsure if he was being mocked. "You want me to flirt with the husband of a man that can kill me with less than a thought?"

"Pretty much so." Bekka smiled.

"That's a dangerous game..."

"But you like a challenge..." She reminded him.

"I do." He pursed his lips and studied Deseem. "Alright, I'll do it."

"I have not agreed yet." Deseem reminded them.

"But you will, say that you will?" Bekka pleaded. "It'll work, I promise it will..."

Deseem glanced down and studied his hands before he looked up to Bishick and spoke in Bastion. "What is your thought?"

"My thought, My Prince, is that often a man isn't aware of what he has until there is a threat that someone else may take it from him."

"I don't wish to hurt him or cause him any worry."

"Change is never without pain, but I believe if this is done properly he won't be hurt by it."

Deseem sighed. "Very well." He said in Bastion and corrected himself. "Very well." He repeated in Trade. "I will play along and try this."

"Excellent!" Bekka clapped her hands together and pulled chairs closer to where Deseem sat so that they could plan. "I was thinking we really should arrange to get Deseem back at Court and have Liam come by..."

"Bekka, dearest..." Dugen grinned and patted her shoulder. "You're making it too complicated. Trust me, I know how to make a husband jealous, I know just what we need to do."

"I'm home." Liam announced as he came in the garden door from the cold outside. The weather was getting truly winter cold and the ground was now covered in a nice coating of snow. He instantly checked to make sure their rooms were warm enough, pushed the chill from the door being opened away and dried the melted snow clumps from boots and paws away so it didn't make a mess.

"Husband." Deseem greeted as he came around the corner of the room.

He let the dark haired man hurry over to take his cloak. Liam only wore it to blend in better and for the first time in his life he considered not making the effort. He could accept the odd looks followed by the fearful looks if it meant Deseem didn't have to fuss so at him. "Thank you. Keeping warm?"

"I don't think I will leave these rooms until spring. I had not known it could grow so cold." Deseem answered with a smile.

And he answered in Trade, which made Liam return the smile. The Bastion accent was still there but Deseem's comfort with the new words was growing. "This cold spell will move on sooner or later and it won't be as frigid for a while." He followed Deseem into their main room where the younger man moved to start serving their lunch, rich, hot stew and fresh bread that the smell of alone made Liam's stomach growl. His eyes weren't so transfixed by Deseem or the food that he missed the blanket unfolded and crumbled on Deseem's chair. "We can have them make you a warmer cloak." He was going to have them bring warmer blankets either way.

"My husband keeps me warm when I go out."

Liam was fairly sure the softly spoken answer wasn't meant to be a come on but he had to gather

up the day's letters and notes that had been delivered with lunch to hide the flush they caused. It was bad enough that he was molesting Deseem every night and sometimes Deseem was returning the molestation in the mornings before he left for work, he didn't need to be adding in an afternoon romp on top of that.

"Still," he muttered as he flipped across the notes and letters. "We should look into it." It was the normal slew of nonsense. Simply because of who his parents were he received a ridiculous amount of invitations to teas, dinners, parties and events. He'd leave it on his desk in an outgoing correspondence tray and the servants would take the stack to a secretary he barely knew. The woman would write back every polite notes of refusal for him. The only reason he even bothered to have his mail delivered at all was the very occasional letter from someone he knew personally. It didn't happen often.

"If my husband feels it's best."

"Jan and Jas wanted to see you again. I suggested they come over some evening, if not for dinner for tea after. If you'd like that?" A letter caught his eye and he pulled it out from the pile. It wasn't addressed to him but rather to Deseem and he flipped it over to see the seal on the back.

"I would, they've been kind to me." He glanced up when Liam lingered by the desk. "Husband?"

"When did you meet Lord Failing?" Liam didn't mean to sound terse but the tone crept in.

"Lord Failing?" He thought about the warm and far too knowing brown eyes. "...I met a Lord Failing at Court in passing."

Liam flipped the letter out and offered it to his husband. "You must have made an impression, he's written you."

He didn't instantly take the letter. Dugen had suggested that when his letter was noticed that Deseem should seem eager to read it but there was no way he could fake that. "I did not ask him to, my husband." Deseem explained but he had to drop his eyes.

"Asked or not, you've a letter." Liam answered as gently as he could before he placed the letter beside Deseem's lunch and took his own seat. "You should open it." He prompted when it seemed that his husband held back.

Very carefully Deseem opened it but the words inside were a flowing script and he struggled to make them out. "Would you read it to me, my husband?" He handed the letter back.

"If you'd like." He had thought Deseem was making progress with reading Trade but the handwriting was in such a flowing complicated script that he had to focus to understand it. "He says, My Prince, I was honored and humbled to have the privilege of meeting you at Court the last time you attended. I do not expect you to recall who I am but please know I am a true supporter of yours. With your permission I would like to offer my friendship and deepest respects. If you would allow it, I would like to guide you at Court and introduce you to others that feel as I do. Your Humble Servant, Lord Dugen Failing." He wasn't quite frowning at the end of the letter, there was nothing improper about it at all.

"Would you please write Lord Failing for me and refuse?"

"He could be a good ally for you. I've heard he's very popular at Court." He'd heard quite a lot about the handsome young man.

"I don't believe I will attend Court often and if I do I have my sister to attend with." He glanced up over his bowl and saw the unhappy frown on Liam's face. That almost made him sputter out the truth of the letter and what everyone was planning. When the blue eyes flicked up and locked

onto him, the truth died on his lips. Liam's eyes looked hungry and it wasn't for stew.

"Don't make the choice now, think about it and I'll help you write him back in a few days. I'd...I'd like for you to make friends." That was the honest truth, he just wasn't sure Lord Failing would make a trustworthy friend. If he was going to respect Deseem's growth from sheltered, kept, abused thing to strong young man he had to allow him to pick his own friends.

"I will think about it, my husband." He nodded but he knew there would never be time to give an answer. As he ate his lunch he only hoped that the people he'd placed his trust in really did know what they were doing.

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Chapter Sixty Seven

Deseem answered a knocking on the door to the hallway. It was a softly rapping sound and urgent enough that he found himself hurrying. The door pulled open easily and he found Bekka in the hallway. She was giggling like a girl far younger than she actually was and the rich warm laughter behind her was from Lord Failing himself.

"May we come in?" Bekka asked.

Deseem glanced behind her to the tray Dugen held and frowned. "What is this?"

"Let me in and I'll explain." She shook her head and brushed past him. "Norlan sent word, we can do part two today."

"My Prince." Dugen greeted warmly and bowed a little as he slid into the room and began unloading the tray onto the table.

"But..."

"No buts it's all planned. He'll be here within the half hour. We have to hurry. Just be glad we had tea today so we didn't have to fake this."

"What?"

"Have to make it look like you two have been sitting here talking for hours. Liam's too clever otherwise."

"Sister...I'm not as certain of this..."

"Well, we are, sit." She pushed a little at Deseem's shoulders and ignored his frown.

He let himself be moved to the chair and took it but didn't ease into it or even stop frowning. Dugen fussed at setting the mostly empty pot of cold tea, the dirty cups and picked about bits of food on dirty plates out on the table. He even arranged the spoons just so and gathered up some crumbs to lightly dust across the table top.

"There." He declared. "Now go away dear before you ruin everything." Dugen leaned over and kissed the side of Bekka's face. "I had a lovely afternoon."

She returned the kiss. "As did I, don't be a stranger."

"That's assuming I live the rest of the day."

"Oh pish." She waved off the worry. "And you, you aren't supposed to look upset, you're supposed to look interested." Bekka reminded Deseem as she moved to the door. "Someone let me know how it goes?"

"Will do." The young lord walked Bekka to the door and held it open for her as she left. "She's right, you don't look happy." He said when he was finally in a room alone with the handsome young prince.

"I am not."

"Understandably so." He folded himself down onto the chair and crossed one long leg over the other. "I assumed that a Prince would have better rooms..." He sighed and glanced around. "Watchers are so austere. I count it a blessing that I inherited not a whit of magic and I am as head blind as all my family."

Deseem glanced up and caught the warm brown eyes studying him. His first instinct was to look away but he refused and kept his eyes strongly locked to the other man. "Why're you doing this?"

"Why?" Dugen raised an eyebrow. "Well, the proper and nice answer is because I am good at it and you need the help. The more honest answer is that I admire the sacrifice both of you have made." He fiddled a little with the spoon resting on the unfolded napkin on the table. "I wasn't supposed to be the Lord Failing, that was my elder brother. He was a Guard officer, as was my sister, both were killed in the war. It was the grief that killed my father." He forced a smile. "So anyone that can keep that horror from touching more families? I will support whole heartedly. Frankly duty should come with some pleasure, it just needs encouraged sometimes."

"I'm sorry for your loss."

"Thank you, My Prince." The serious look melted and a languid smile took it's place. "The not so nice but far more honest answer is less flattering. You are stunning. I thought Watcher Liam was breathtakingly handsome but he's too cold to approach. There's nothing cold about you, you're a banked fire I would love to fan into flames."

"I am married." Deseem reminded the handsome man firmly.

"I know and I know you are trying to build a life with your husband, but if he proves too cold for even your fire to reach? I will be right here." He shrugged. "Maybe you will remember that I tried to help and look kindly upon me." Dugen was guessing direct honesty would work best with the handsome young prince. "It would be my honor to make your life more pleasurable."

Deseem raised his chin and refused to back down. "I do not know what manner of noble is common here in Corena but life is not about pleasure but duty and responsibility."

"Those are cold companions, duty and responsibility, if not tempered with more. I'm just offering

fair warning to you, My Prince. If your efforts to win your husband's affection fail I plan to pursue you."

"I think you'll find me difficult prey."

"We'll see..."

Before Deseem could answer he heard the garden door open.

"I'm home, Deseem. Lach cancelled our run so I'm early. I know it's cold but I was thinking we could go for a walk before dinner, if you'd like?" Liam called out from the other room as he made his way into the main room. Only Deseem wasn't alone and Liam froze in the doorway.

Lord Failing hopped to his feet and bowed. "Watcher Liam."

"Lord Failing, I'm surprised to find you here. I wasn't aware that you'd be visiting." The only thing colder than Liam's voice was his eyes.

"I had stopped in simply to say hello to Prince Deseem and was in time for tea." He glanced to where the handsome dark haired foreign man sat looking startled and a little guilty. "We lost track of the time, I'm sorry. I hadn't noticed it had grown so late."

"It is late."

"Husband..." Deseem spoke softly.

Liam heard the fear in the quiet voice and he forced a smile. "It's okay, please, Lord Failing, I am a poor host. Dinner will be here soon, stay and dine with us?"

The smile only made Liam's face look worse, sharper, colder and more like a snarl than a smile. Deseem felt guilty for putting his husband through their little game. "Husband...it's not what it seems..."

"It's okay Deseem. Haven't I been the one to encourage you to make friends? This is not Bastion." He forced himself to say.

"I should have written first, I was just in the area and thought to say hello." Dugen added with a falsely casual tone. He knew their rooms were out of the way, no one just happened to be in their end of the palace and he knew Liam would know.

"Stay for dinner, Lord Failing. I wouldn't wish to interrupt."

He gathered up his hat and stepped away from the cold tea service. "The offer is most generous but really I've missed appointments already today. I don't wish to intrude further than I have." He added just enough guilt mixed with a desperation to escape to make Liam's forced smile freeze and disappear. "Prince Deseem, I deeply enjoyed our conversation and look forward to further contact with you, if it would please you?" He bowed again to both the men, lingering a little too long with his eyes on Deseem before he backed up and quickly disappeared out the door.

It left Deseem alone with Liam and it lacked the comfortable ease they normally shared. "Husband..."

"It's alright. I want you to have friends, Deseem. It must be lonely for you here, by yourself most of the day."

Deseem shook his head and wanted to protest but Liam wasn't looking at him. "Husband?"

"Yes?"

"I think I would like that walk."

Liam didn't necessarily want to walk across snowy paths now. The desire had sunk into the pit of his stomach and he wasn't sure why but Deseem still wanted to go out. It would have been rude to refuse and Liam couldn't quite bring himself to be rude because he now wasn't feeling like going. He found himself nodding and agreeing but all he wanted to do was stay inside, preferably alone.

Lach rolled to the side and coughed. He'd been keeping pace with Liam but gave in and admitted weakness when his younger brother kept pushing himself to do more sit ups. "Tell me why we're killing ourselves with first year trainee stress testing bullshit?" He whined but Liam didn't even look over. "I think I'm going to puke."

"You're soft." Liam whispered as he forced his body to keep moving.

"I'm not a trainee anymore." They'd already gone on their normal run, the cold winter air biting with every breath but Liam hadn't been satisfied with that. He'd made it clear he was going to continue with Lach or without him. Lach had followed along and been outpaced with push ups and pull ups and now sit ups.

"No excuse."

Lach knew there was no way he was going to talk his brother into stopping. Liam would continue to push himself until he physically couldn't but that didn't mean he had to make himself sick as well. All Watchers were to remain in a battle ready state but that didn't mean they had to remain in perfect fitness their entire lives. Lach knew he was quite capable of drawing a sword or a bow and going into battle if he had to but he also knew he wasn't nearly as fit as his brother.

He watched as Liam struggled to finish a few more sit ups, his body trembling, his face gone red, before he finally gave up and collapsed to the floor. He was breathing hard and had his eyes squinted shut.

"If you're going to throw up do it the other way."

"I'm fine."

"Yeah, right." Lach sat up and glanced around. There were other people in the building but none within earshot. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"Liar."

"Lord Failing." Liam finally confessed as he climbed to his feet.

"What? What about him?" He hated having to play dumb. "He's not chasing you again is he?"

"No, he's sniffing around Deseem." He pushed his braid back over his shoulder and almost was annoyed enough to get a blade and cut it off.

"They probably met at Court."

"Hm."

"I'm sure it's harmless."

"Harmless? That fool sent Deseem a chest filled with Bastion spices and teas. Must have cost a fortune and that isn't a gift you give a friend." He heard himself snap at his brother.

"Deseem should have friends."

"Yes!" Liam shook his head and shut his mouth.

"He wouldn't do anything without speaking to you first." Lach spoke softly, caught off guard by how upset Liam was. He'd known about the gift, it had been bought by Lach not Lord Failing. Deseem had flat out refused to accept anything that was given to him by Dugen. He'd even had to have been talked into letting Liam think the gift had been from the other man.

"I know. I trust Deseem. Lord Failing is a wolf and Deseem is still too innocent. It's not right." He snapped again and felt like he wanted to scream. That was a bad feeling, screaming would shatter his control and if he lost control bad things would happen.

"You okay?"

"I'm fine. I just..." He shook his head. "I just want to throw Failing into a wall or punch him or something every time I see his smug, knowing face."

"I wouldn't recommend that."

"He acts like Deseem is already his, like it's over and done with."

Lach hid a smile by glancing away. "You sound jealous."

"I'm not." Liam protested. "Deseem doesn't understand. You can't be nice to Failing's type, he'll take that for interest and...and things will happen." The idea hadn't really occurred to Liam that Failing could push his relationship with Deseem further than maybe Deseem would want. "If he hurts him..."

"Liam?" There was real malice in the threat and Lach wondered if maybe they should pull back on their plans. What Norlan had cooked up to push Laim past denial into bold honesty was truly evil and not a good idea if Liam was already so on edge.

"It's okay, I just won't allow anyone to hurt him. He's not able to protect himself yet and he's been hurt too much already." He brushed stray hair back from his face and called for Baxter to follow them. "He's like a kid brother, someone's got to keep him out of trouble."

"Uh huh, kid brother. Odd I don't remember being all hot and bothered when I was being protective of my kid brother. In fact I seem to recall he was kind of awkward and gross."

"I wasn't gross." He protested and forced a smile but inside, Liam's stomach still felt tied up in knots.

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Chapter Sixty Eight

For a moment Deseem thought he'd heard them wrong. "I'm sorry?" He glanced to Norlan as the only man in the room that spoke Bastion. "I think I didn't understand properly."

Bekka leaned over and took one of Deseem's hands in her own. "Dugen and Norlan have it all figured out. Liam is on edge and upset but he's stubborn, we need to push him as hard as we can. He needs to have no doubts that someone else is courting you."

Deseem sat straighter. "No one else is!"

"I know that sweetie, we all do but he doesn't. Liam needs to have all doubts removed about what will happen if he doesn't wake up. You're a handsome young man, you could have anyone you wished as friend or lover." She tried again.

Norlan came over and knelt down so he was looking up into the amber eyes. Sometimes a less threatening posture worked better than any words could. "Deseem, Liam is trying to tell himself that it's okay for you to find affection elsewhere. He's trying to convince himself that it's for the best and it won't matter. Now, I don't believe that, none of us do. We can see how he looks at you and frankly we can see how you look at him. You love him, do you not?"

"I am a child of the Guiding Star. Love is not necessary." He jutted out his chin and boldly locked eyes with the older man.

"Than you won't mind if I renew my relationship with Liam? It won't bother you?"

Something brittle and scalding filled his stomach and Deseem surged to his feet. "Do what you will but he is married to me and nothing you can do and none of your games can change that!"

Norlan didn't react with anger or jealousy. Instead he smiled very gently and stood up. Carefully he reached out and cupped the side of Deseem's face, ignoring the way the boy flinched back. He knew quite well how to touch damaged creatures, he'd tamed and soothed many across the span of his life. "Deseem, I do not wish to be a threat to you. All I want is for you and Liam to be happy together."

"We are."

"He hides from you out of fear of loss but he needs to see he will lose if he doesn't take a risk. He's close but we have to do this, he needs to be woken up. Imagine if you had lost Liam as he lost our wife? Imagine the pain, can you do that?"

Deseem wasn't sure he could but he nodded.

"The fear of pain, of being hurt that deeply again, causes people to avoid any chance of being hurt. Only he's cutting out happiness as well. Do you understand that?" Norlan spoke carefully,

trying to keep his own accented Trade from garbling the words. As he spoke, eyes locked so firmly to Deseem's he tried to project trust and empathy toward the other man. His magic wasn't made to be used on humans but a human was simply a different sort of animal and if he focused he often could have a small effect.

It was enough. Deseem felt himself nodding. He did understand, he'd been driven by the fear of pain as well. He'd lived too long knotted up in terror at being cleansed again or being found out as damaged and rejected, failing, and being punished for it. Liam had soothed that fear, helped him moved beyond it and he was happy now. It was his turn to try to do the same for his husband.

He licked his lips in nerves and spoke very softly. "This will make him happy?"

"If it doesn't," Norlan answered. "He's an idiot and I don't think he is." He let his hands slip from the stubborn face. "So, are you still willing to play along?"

"I do not like this idea."

"But will you play along?"

He didn't want to. Deseem glanced around and everyone looked so certain. "I will play along."

"Good."

"On one condition."

Looks were exchanged around the room but it was Norlan that had to ask. "What would that be?"

"My brother stays in the room, hidden if he must be. I will not do this otherwise."

"It's just an act." Dugen added from where he was sitting, relaxed, in Liam's chair. "I promise I will not actually molest you."

"I require my brother to be here."

Lach sighed and caught his wife's shrug. "I can stay. Not sure where I'll hide at but I'll stay."

"We can crack the door to the hall open and you can stay out there. You'll be able to see inside but Liam won't notice you right away. Does that work for you Deseem?" Norlan glanced between the two men.

"It will suit." Deseem nodded.

"Whatever. Liam better appreciate this..." He muttered as he moved to stand in the darkened hallway, trying to figure out what angle would allow him to see the most.

"Okay, Norlan and I are leaving. Play along when Liam gets home, Deseem, just you wait and see!" Bekka grinned and was all smiles which only seemed to make Deseem frown more. "He should be on his way home, it won't be long."

Deseem was pacing as they left, his hands clenched up together in front of him. "I do not like this." He protested again.

"You might just find you like it quite a bit." Dugen teased gently.

The warm brown eyes were languid and teasing. They seemed to be promising things that Deseem's mind was simply unable to comprehend. There was little doubt falling into that warmth

would be vastly different from ice blue but Deseem didn't want warmth. He enjoyed seeing ice thawing too much.

"There is nothing about this I like." Deseem stopped pacing.

Dugen stood. "Would you like to practice? We want this to look convincing."

"I am fine."

"You have no idea how stunning you are, do you?" Lord Failing moved closer and very carefully reached out to brush one stray black curl back under the vibrant green veil Deseem still wore wrapped around his hair.

Deseem pulled away a little but the fingers didn't touch his skin, not even a small brushing contact in passing.

"A man could easily find himself obsessed with you. If your husband does not accept you, know that I will do anything in my power to make you smile. It would be my greatest honor to find a way to make you happy."

"My happiness is not your concern."

Dugen shrugged one shoulder very carefully. "I'd like to make it my concern."

In the other room the garden door rattled and soon Baxter's nails were making tapping sounds on the floor as he hurried in from the cold. Deseem partly turned, suddenly convinced that the whole idea was a stupid plan. He wanted to call out and stop Liam from coming in. He wanted a chance to explain and put his faith in his husband's goodness and willingness to understand. Deseem didn't get the chance to call out.

Dugen's hand slipped up and caught the fabric of the veil. With a small tug it slipped down and pooled around Deseem's shoulders. The thick black hair was held back only by two slender braids, the rest he'd been wearing loose because Liam seemed to like it better that way. The curls and waves slipped out and Deseem turned angrily back to the other man but his protest stuttered away when the hand that had slipped the veil down buried itself into his hair.

They were only supposed to pretend to touch. The idea was for Liam to see them in an almost embrace, almost touching. He was supposed to be given the thought that things might be open for someone else if he didn't take action and admit his feelings. The idea of an almost touch worried Deseem but Dugen wasn't almost touching him.

"Deseem? I'm home, is lunch here yet?" Liam called out from the other room. "I swear I'm starving, this skipping breakfast has to stop."

He opened his mouth to call out but a tug pulled on his arm and Deseem stumbled forward. He landed in Lord Failing's arms, bodies far closer than he would have liked. It wasn't an entirely unpleasant feeling and Deseem felt himself blushing at the realization that touch might feel as good physically from someone other than his husband. As it sunk in that he should be protesting, a mouth pressed to his own. It was dry and soft. The kiss was almost shy and a bit timid but it was a kiss. Another man was kissing him and Deseem stood so frozen in shock that he didn't know quite what to do.

Liam heard his feet shuffle to a stop but couldn't feel them. His body was numb and he knew it was shock. What he was seeing in his main room couldn't be real. Deseem couldn't be in another man's arms. Deseem couldn't have his hair exposed while in the arms of another man. Most of all, his mind refused to believe that Deseem would be kissing another man. He stood for one painful second frozen in place with none of it real before the horrible truth of it sunk in.

Across the room Deseem pulled away from Lord Failing's arms and turned. His face was red, flushed with embarrassment or fear at being caught. Liam saw the golden eyes go wide, watched the way Deseem's mouth moved but no words came out. When the younger man finally managed to speak it was a single word.

"Husband..."

Liam flinched and worried he'd become ill where he stood. The air felt like it had been sucked from the room but he was too out of control to check and make sure it hadn't been. It wasn't supposed to snow until that night but Liam knew he was spiraling out of control when he felt the flakes pouring down from the clouds that were hanging low over head.

"I'm..." He managed to force out. The ground below them shivered a little, not quite a tremble but it moved enough that Lord Failing looked around and things on shelves rattled. Liam drew a deep breath that felt too short and hurt his chest. "Forgive me for interrupting."

Deseem stepped forward. "Husband..."

Liam saw the horror in the golden eyes and he couldn't meet them a moment longer. He couldn't even speak. He simply shook his head a little, a tiny bauble of it and nothing more. There were no words to be said and he feared if he tried he'd snap and bad, very bad things could happen.

Instead of trying to speak, trying to be a bigger man about things, Liam ducked his head down into his hunched up shoulders and moved to hurry from the room. He had to get away, that was all his mind could think. If he didn't get away he'd lose it and he couldn't lose it. Another whispered word from Deseem and he'd shatter, there was no doubt of it and Liam stumbled out into the hallway.

Lach caught his shoulders. "Hey..."

It wasn't anything he wanted to hear. "Leave me alone!" He shouted at his brother. He dug his heels in and shoved back, pushing Lach away and breaking free of his hands. Freed of the grasping touch he hurried away, passing what he thought was Bekka and Norlan but neither one moved to speak to him and he kept going.

Norlan didn't believe in ladies first and he moved around Bekka to push his way into the room. "What the hell happened?" He demanded but Lach had Lord Failing by the arm and had dragged him several feet away from Deseem.

"I did my job!" Failing shouted back.

"He actually kissed Deseem." Lach answered.

"He what?" Bekka's eyes went wide and she glanced to where Deseem stood, frozen with no expression on his face.

"Are you a fool or an idiot?" Norlan snapped out. "Damn it, this is going to be too much! We have to find him, we have to explain..."

"All of you, get out." Deseem whispered.

"What?" Bekka asked, unsure she'd heard right since Deseem hadn't moved.

"Get out." Deseem turned, his eyes almost glowing with anger. "Get out! Get out of my rooms!"

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Chapter Sixty Nine

"Deseem, calm down..." Bekka started but the golden eyes flashed at her.

"I trusted that you wouldn't make things worse! Get out!"

"It's okay." Norlan soothed. "Things went too far but it's not something that can't be fixed. Lord Failing just pushed things a little too far."

"You wanted him jealous, he's jealous. It's not my fault he ran away."

It wasn't a conscious thought to move. Deseem had been nearly frozen since he'd witness the horror and shocked pain plastered across Liam's face and buried in his eyes, but hearing Lord Failing speak ill of his husband shocked him out of it. He quickly stalked over to stand in front of the other man.

"My husband is not a coward! Do not accuse him of such!" Deseem shouted and his words were echoed by a rumble of thunder. "Get out of my rooms! GET OUT!" He wanted to hit the other man, to beat him as he'd once been beaten, but Deseem wasn't sure he could even if he knew how.

"Was that..." Lach glanced to the window and the rapidly falling snow.

Norlan shook his head. "We need to find him."

"Bekka can you?" Lach nodded to where Lord Failing was still being screamed at by Deseem but stood uncertain if he should go or stay.

"Right, come on dear, let's get out of the way." She moved quickly to catch Dugen's arm and had to almost pull him bodily from the room. The young lord stood still in place, transfixed by Deseem's sudden rage.

The door shutting away Bekka and Dugen wasn't enough. Deseem turned to the two men that remained. "Both of you, go away!" He snarled. "You've done enough damage, done enough harm! This is what you've wanted all along wasn't it? Drive him away, push him beyond me! You've wanted him for yourself!"

Lach glanced to the window as another rumble of thunder echoed across the valley. "That's so

odd..."

"Just stop it!" Norlan snapped back almost as loudly, shouting over Deseem's own emotion. "If I had wanted Liam to myself I could have had him, before you, after you, today if I'd wished it! Shut up and stop being a fool!"

Deseem shut up. His anger was still sharp but it was a thin coating over a deep well of hurt that he didn't want to feel.

"Better. Lach can you find your brother?"

Lach's eyes glazed over and he focused on something only he could see. "Yeah, I can, he's slippery to track but I can find him." Whatever he saw made him smile the tiniest of bits. "I don't need to, I know where he's going."

"Go to him, calm him down, bring him back here."

"I think you should go to him."

Norlan shook his head. "There are too many memories between us. He needs his brother right now, not an old lover. Just go to him and bring him back here. Can you do that?"

Lach nodded. "Yeah I hope so." He glanced out the window again, but while the snow was still falling at a fast pace the rumbling of thunder had died away. "I'll be back as soon as I can." He knew where Liam was headed and he knew he could always talk his baby brother into some sense. With a final nod to Deseem, Lach left the rooms.

"I want you to leave too!" Deseem glared at Norlan.

"I will, but we need to talk first."

"Enough has been said, leave."

"Saints and Ancestors you're more stubborn than Liam!" Norlan cursed and shook his head. "Don't you get it? I don't love him, not the way you do, but I love him enough to do anything to give him a chance to be happy. I sent the two people who meant the most to me off to fight your people and neither one came back. Now here I am, on the verge of reclaiming one of them and your stupid stubbornness isn't going to stop me! I'm going to help you whether you want me to or not!" His hands darted about as he nearly shouted at the younger man. "Now, sit down and listen and I will tell you the last thing you need to know to claim Laim as your own. To make him yours totally and without reserve."

"You don't know anymore than I do. You don't or we wouldn't be here."

"Actually, I do. So sit down and listen."

It was against Deseem's better judgment but he found himself sitting down.

Liam was deep into the palace grounds before he knew where he was or what he was doing. When some sense finally returned he wasn't sure where he was headed. Some part of him wondered if he'd headed off to see his mother but she'd been little comfort with emotional issues ever since he'd been a child. His father wouldn't have been a bad choice, the man was warm and understood things but he still watched Liam with suspicion and worry peeking around the concern. Liam didn't think he could stand to see that. He had to figure out where he was going soon because people were noticing him, it made his skin crawl.

He knew where he needed to go and it was early enough that the room would be empty. It took a few twists and turns to reach the throne room by more indirect routes all in an effort to avoid people but when he did finally make it to a side door he made it without anyone stopping him. The room was vast and echoing when so empty and something about its emptiness had always soothed him. He drew a breath as he walked in, his bootheels clicking on the smooth stone floor that echoed with age.

Liam stopped half way to the raised dais area where the rather simple thrones sat empty. Three servants were rubbing at the dark wood that formed a small railing two dozen paces from the dais but their work and gossip ended when they saw him. It almost made him turn to go, to try to find a place that was truly private but he wanted to be here.

"Sir?" The oldest of the three asked carefully.

"Leave me." Liam ordered, his voice was caught by the well tuned acoustics of the room and carried easily to them.

They exchanged a look between them and nodded. "Yes sir." The eldest nodded and all three bowed a little as they backed away from him. When they were several paces away they turned and hurried away.

That was the reaction that bothered him. Even the most informal of servants, the ones that had smacked his fingers as if he were their own child, now were thrilled to escape him when he looked the slightest bit off. It broke his heart and made him want to ride as far as he could from Corinth, as far as he could from anyone that knew him. It was easier to push that need to run aside while he stood alone in a room built for hundreds with a ceiling that vaulted high above him.

"Lady... what am I doing?" He whispered into the silent room but he knew why he was here. Any Watcher could walk into this room anytime Court was not being held and ask to be alone. It was an old tradition and one that continued for a reason.

He walked over to the dais and found the spot without searching. Even blindfolded he could find it by the feel that trembled from his magic. It was unmistakable even with the passage of centuries to dull the ache. It pulled him over as if he a cord was around him and Liam didn't fight it. He let it pull him down to sit next to the damaged, ancient stone, uncertain what to do or where else to go.

Boots clicked on the stone but Liam didn't need to look over his shoulder to see who it was that approached. Norlan's boots wouldn't have made sound and no one else would have disturbed him. "Are you here as an elder prince, Captain of the Watchers or my brother?"

"I'd like to think as your brother. May I join you?" Lach asked carefully. The tension in Liam's shoulders was obvious and the air smelled like lightening.

"When have I refused you?" He bowed his head more and white hair spilled forward to cover his face. His hands splayed out over the lines broken into the stone but he couldn't quite bring himself to trace the fractures with touch or talent.

"You're always drawn here when you're feeling unstable. Are there answers in those stones that you can read? If there are, please tell me. I could use some of Watcher Morin's strength most days." Lach sat down on the dais but stayed a careful distance away. It wasn't to put space between himself and his brother but rather between himself and the broken stone. Most Watcher's couldn't quite bring themselves to touch the spot and Lach had never dared. He'd always feared his magic would show him those final horrible moments of a horrible time in history.

"I can feel the fire still." Liam whispered, his eyes unfocusing as he let the stones pull him down. His fingers glided over and he felt the way the heat had shattered the stones and just as easily fused them together again. "These stones in here are so much older than this scar. It's hard to imagine Watcher Morin, loving a madman, a monster, enough to call this kind of fury down to stop him." The stories of Morin and the Dreamkiller always made him queasy and oddly a little thrilled at the same time. "You found me sooner than I expected. What were you doing in the hallway, Lach?"

Liam's voice was low and had a dark horrible tone to it. It made Lach shiver a bit and he wondered if maybe it was a tiny bit of the helpless fear that Morin had to have felt facing down the Dreamkiller, knowing he was out matched and couldn't win. "It wasn't what it looked like."

"It looked just like what it was. Lord Failing isn't know for being shy about what he desires. He's a good looking enough man. I can't..." His voice broke but he took a long, shaky breath and held onto his control. "I can't blame Deseem."

"No, you shouldn't blame him, you can blame me and Bekka and Norlan."

"What?" Liam looked up from the physical reminder of what happened when control was lost but his brother wasn't looking at him.

"Deseem loves you. He should resent you, you know that right? If I was sold off to some man in another country and forced to give up everything I was? I would resent that man and hate him but he loves you. Really loves you and he is too proud to say it directly to you. All he'll say is that he is Bastion and a Bastion spouse doesn't need love but he's lying. That boy adores you."

"He barely knows me."

Lach shrugged. "Like it or not, you've let him in more than you've let any of us in since the war. He knows you better, in some ways, than I do. He knows you well enough to know. We talked him into this. It sounds stupid now but they thought...we thought...if you just saw that he can't wait for you forever you might wake up."

Liam shook his head. "You're all mad."

"We just want you to be happy. You don't seem happy and then, lately, with Deseem, you've looked happy again. We just wanted to nudge you, get you to see it too."

"By having Lord Failing--" he spat the name out, "--seduce my husband? That was your plan?"

"Well no, he improvised a bit. You're angry, I can understand that." He nodded. "I'd be too."

"I'm not angry." He forced the words out but they sounded angry even to his own ears, angry and hurt.

"You don't always have to try to be so steady. Let's go somewhere, there's practice rooms, sealed for the elemental magics, not more than a few hundred yards from here. Let's go, you can let go and it'll be okay."

"I can't."

"Or we can go into the forest, I doubt the Guardians will mind if you wreck a little havoc. You can blow off some steam. It'll do you some good."

"I can't! You don't understand, you can't! I can't, I can't let it go!" He spread his hands wide over the long since damaged stone. "I'm an Elemental, Lach, the magic is so much a part of me if I let

it out now? It'll pull the world apart. You didn't see me during the war, you didn't see what I can do when I've lost control. I can't be that again, even to vent some emotion, I can't."

"You're going to have to figure something out because, honestly, you look like you're about ready to explode."

The cautious tone from his brother made him snort in sharp bitter laughter. "You've no idea....no idea..." He was having trouble breathing and each breath was an effort, a focus in control.

"He loves you. Not the prince, not the Watcher, you, with all your brooding moodiness and cold distances, he loves you. Don't punish him because we were idiots."

"I can't do this, Lach, I can't."

"He seems like he'd be pretty easy to love. Or, don't you care for him?" They'd all been just assuming that Liam was merely denying his own emotions but none of them had discussed that maybe he really didn't have any feelings.

"I do." Liam whispered and the confession broke him. "Lady help me I do."

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Chapter Seventy

"Than what's the problem?"

"I let her die!" He finally snapped out. "I let her die! It's my fault, if it weren't for me she'd still be alive! She followed me to war, she followed me to that meeting. It's my fault she died! Mine! I can't...I just can't..."

"Oh Liam..." Lach sighed. "I would take a thousand wounds to free you from that but you are the only that stop this pain. It wasn't your fault. She was twice as stubborn as you are and no force, mortal or no, could have stopped her from following you. You're a powerful man but even you can't be responsible for everything. She made her choices, same as you have, and things happened. The last thing she would have wished was for you to continue punishing yourself over it. She'd want you to be happy."

Liam brushed his hair back from his face and wiped roughly at his eyes. "I don't know if I can love him, Lach. I don't know if I have it in me anymore. I still wonder if I actually survived her death. I don't know how...I just don't know how to try again. How can he understand that let alone accept that? He should move on, even to someone like Lord Failing."

The words were so bleak Lach didn't know what to say. He sat and thought, his mind scrambling

for some argument, some statement that would give a small measure of hope to his brother.
“How did it feel to see Deseem in Lord Failing’s arms?”

“Not good.” He forced out around a clenched jaw.

“It hurt?”

“Yes.”

“You will be hurt to lose him already. He means something to you. You might not be ready for love again but I hate to tell you, you are bonded to him. It’s going to hurt to lose him. It’s too late to run from that now. It’s just a question if you’re willing to accept that truth. You’d be foolish not to and my kid brother is no one’s fool because he really, really cares about you.”

“It’s not so simple. I would always be missing what I had. That isn’t fair, Lach and it hurts me. I don’t think I can stop missing her. It was... don’t laugh at me...” He warned.

“I wouldn’t dream of it.”

“I could let go with them Lach. I could breathe and relax and it was safe. I felt steady and stable and safe. Gods, I felt so safe and I haven’t a day since and I... some days I don’t think I can keep going...”

“You’re still wounded, you’re still healing but you need to let go some to get better.” He patted the tense shoulder. “What do you say we go back? Deseem was furious, I thought he was going to kill Lord Failing he was so angry. He’s scared you won’t ever forgive him. Are you still mad?”

“Yes, oh yes, I’m still very mad, but not at him.”

“You can kick my ass at jung-jo, break my hand again if it’ll make you feel better but let’s get back so you can tell Deseem you’re not mad at him. Okay?”

Liam drew a slow breath and was surprised that it didn’t hurt. “Yeah, okay, but Failing is gone right? I can’t promise I won’t hurt him if he’s still around.”

“He’s gone. Promise.” Lach grinned a little and hoped that Bekka was smart enough to keep Failing away because he really did believe what Liam said. “Let’s get you home.”

When the door opened, Deseem hopped to his feet. Lach was the first one to come into the room but Liam followed close behind him. Even with his husband’s eyes lowered to the floor Deseem could see that the shocked pain was gone but the tense distance remained. He wanted to run over. He wanted to throw himself at his husband’s feet and beg for forgiveness but Deseem couldn’t move.

“Well.” Norlan stood up as well. “Things didn’t go entirely as planned but it could be worse.”

“Crazy Clansmen.” Lach muttered.

“Perhaps, come on you, let’s leave them alone and I need a drink.” Norlan moved to haul Lach away by force if he had to but the younger man moved to go on his own. Only he didn’t follow and instead paused in front of Liam. “Find some happiness, Liam. It’s time.” He patted the side of the down turned face before he gathered the tense body into a very quick and very light hug. Norlan paused again at the door but this time his eyes didn’t seek out Liam. “Deseem, remember what I told you...”

Deseem didn't speak or even nod in acknowledgment. He'd been asked to trust the other man and he wasn't sure he should. All that he cared about was that Liam was back in their rooms and they were alone.

"Husband?" He whispered.

Liam didn't move, he didn't even look up.

"Husband..." Deseem almost moaned but he found his legs were trembling so he let himself fold down to kneel on the floor. "I'm sorry, I...God protect me I'm sorry. I just wanted you to...I just..." He swallowed hard and forced the words out. "I would rather die than hurt you, I'm sorry, it wasn't...I didn't think...I was stupid...I'm so sorry...I'm so sorry I'm such a failure..."

The first step Liam took was the most painful but after that he moved easier. He couldn't stand there and listen to Deseem's softly begging words without it cutting them both to ribbons. There was no thought to it, he knelt down next to Deseem and took the younger man's hands between his own.

"Stop." He whispered, his voice hoarse and rough. "Deseem, stop...I can't allow..." He tensed his shoulders but the words needed to come out. "I won't allow anyone to speak so about my husband, not even my husband."

The softly spoken words weren't what Deseem would have every expected to hear. He'd stopped worrying about Liam beating him and doubted the man ever would raise a hand to him but that didn't mean he didn't still feel he deserved it. Deseem had expected Liam to be cold, distant, maybe even angry. He'd been equally expecting silence and shouting but he'd never expected tenderness or hushed understanding.

Carefully, Deseem dared to glance up but the ice blue eyes told him little. The same general, cold, distant scowl was on Liam's face but he'd long since learned that it was merely a mask his husband hid behind. Norlan's words flooded over him and he saw it now, saw the deeply buried shy boy Liam had been. He saw the terrible fear of being alone and isolated forever that Liam hid behind his icy exterior. Deseem saw the desperate hunger for contact and security and it washed over him that Norlan had been right. If Norlan had been so right, seen so much more than Deseem had, he should be right about everything. Deseem was willing to believe, willing to trust and he leaned across the space between their bodies and kissed his husband.

He liked to think he'd gotten fairly skilled at kissing. Liam certainly didn't seem to mind when Deseem wanted to practice. He'd been enjoying knowing that if he grew bored with reading and studying at night he could curl up against Liam or on Liam's lap and kiss for as long as he wanted. He'd been practicing because he enjoyed it so much and Liam seemed to as well and it made him feel warm and good. Now he was glad he'd been less shy and more apt to take what he wanted because Liam pulled away a little from the first, careful kisses.

"Deseem, stop, I'm tired..."

Norlan had said to ignore any protests and Deseem trusted his advice. He reached over and pressed his fingertips to Liam's lips and stilled his words. Before he could be stopped Deseem moved forward to half sit across Liam's legs, a position he liked when they were undressed and liked equally well clothed. He held either side of Liam's face still and claimed another kiss, this time one that wasn't so careful, this time one that was more demanding.

Liam's hands didn't rise up to circle around him or touch him as they normally did. Instead they fell away behind him and Liam leaned back a little, putting his weight on his arms. It was a small withdrawal but Deseem wasn't fooled by it. His husband's lips were parted and he met each kiss openly, accepting blindly the demands Deseem was making of him.

"Deseem...don't...I...ohh..." Liam whispered but his protests died away as Deseem moved to aggressively kiss and nip his jaw line. When those kisses moved to tease his neck and the hidden spots behind his ears that always reduced him to whimpering moans Liam pulled away again.

All his motion did was get his legs unfolded and extended out before him. It wasn't the protesting escape he'd thought he was going to make. Instead it allowed Deseem to settle more fully astride of his lap and give the younger man even more control over the kisses that fluttered down over his skin. Liam felt pinned in place and trapped even though he knew he could toss the more slender man aside with ease. All he did was moan a little in desperation as Deseem's hands slipped across his body.

Over the weeks Deseem had gotten quite good at knowing every tie, buckle and button of a Watcher's uniform. He'd learned which ones had to be undone to part the cloth and which were more ornamental. He'd learned how to undo every bit by feel and with little to no thought and he was glad for it now as his fingers worked without his having to think.

"We...we can't...not now..." Liam whispered but the protest was a very weak one because Deseem's fingers were sliding over skin now, not fabric and Liam wasn't sure he could stand it and stay sane. For all his worries, when Deseem moved to slip cloth away, to peel it off of his body to be discarded, Liam not only didn't stop him he found himself helping.

This time, faced with Liam's pants being opened and slightly parted, Deseem wasn't paused by shyness. He leaned forward and claimed another searing kiss, one that demanded the way Liam's kisses often demanded of him, and easily let his hand slip down past the black fabric. Below him Liam arched and moaned under the kiss but the sound had a hint of pain to it, a glaze of misery that Deseem's ears caught.

He was the one to break the kiss this time. Maybe he'd been wrong to trust Norlan? Maybe he'd pushed his husband's vulnerabilities too far? Liam was a strong man in body and magic but Deseem knew he was often emotionally fragile and he was quite fragile now. Wounds didn't have to draw blood or leave bruises to hurt and if Deseem had failed again and hurt his husband he wasn't sure what he would do.

Only as he studied the paler face, the not quite beautiful handsome face that had come to mean so much to him, he didn't see a new wound but the echo of an old one. The mask of cold indifference and empty distaste Liam used was gone and all that remained was the still very broken young man that cowered behind it. Eyes the color of water hid behind fluttering white lashes and Deseem knew he wasn't imagining their silent begging for love. Pushing Liam now would hurt but it was a hurt they both needed if they were going to survive. Deseem saw the truth in the open, exposed face below him and stopped doubting the advice Norlan gave him.

Gently, Deseem trailed the tips of his fingers across Liam's face and he watched the look of longing deepen as his husband's eyes fluttered shut again. "Bedroom..." Deseem whispered.

"Deseem..."

He shook his head. "Bedroom, so that I may become your husband."

"I don't think..." Liam started to whisper.

"Shhh." Deseem soothed. "I am your husband, come to the bedroom." He tried to sound like a husband but wasn't sure he was believable. It must have had the right tone to it because Liam nodded slightly and when Deseem slipped off of his lap he stood up to follow. He wasn't going to leave it to chance or cooperation that Liam would follow, Deseem took one of the callused, strong hands and he led the taller man toward the bedroom.

The bedroom door shut behind them and Deseem was glad for it. He didn't want to have the door open in case someone came into the main room or Liam made a run for it or Baxter wandered in to watch. The last thing Deseem needed was an audience, he wasn't feeling very strong as it was. That was a lesson he'd forgotten in the cleansing and beatings, the lessons Irend had taught him as a small boy. The child of the Guiding Star of Bastion was supposed to be fearless, which didn't mean he wasn't afraid he just didn't show it. He needed that lesson now, he may not be as bold and confident as Norlan said he needed to be but he didn't have to show his doubts. That was easier if he didn't have too many eyes watching him.

Liam stopped where Deseem let go of his hand, several paces from the bed and almost in the center of the room. He didn't even look up as Deseem moved to the garden doors and pulled the curtains all the way closed to block out any passer bys and dim the light down to a softer glow. When he turned back to his husband he wasn't surprised to see that Liam hadn't moved but he was surprised to see the tension on the lean shoulders and how his hands were now balled up into fists.

He sighed and wondered if he'd looked the same to Liam on their wedding night, closed down, shy, filled with tension. Deseem moved carefully, aware that too quick of a movement would seem even more startling when his husband was already so tightly wound up. With gentle hands he gathered the shower of white hair up into a bundle and soothed it down to fall in one spill down the long back. He petted his fingers through it several times, no longer shy about touching the odd hair and knowing that Liam expected people to be disturbed by it.

Very carefully he soothed it to the side and stood a little on tip toes to more easily place a tender kiss on the back of Liam's neck. "I do adore your hair." He confessed. "I would never wish to see you dye it another color." Under his lips he felt Liam shiver a little but if it was from his words or merely from a whisper so close to his ear Deseem didn't know.

He didn't wait to find out and he let his hands slip under fabric again. Only this time he wasn't looking to merely touch, he stripped the cloth away and dropped it away to the side. Liam's arms instantly came up and folded over his chest.

"I can't do this." He whispered. "Not now...later..."

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Snowflakes and Embers

Chapter Seventy One

"Shhh, I'm not going to hurt you." Deseem soothed. There had been a time when seeing his husband half clothed made him blush and look away, it felt like a lifetime ago. Now he looked freely, boldly and enjoyed it. There was so much pale skin everywhere, soft skin over steel hard body, a warrior that he had no doubts could face anything but struggled with trusting him to understand. The contrasts were more desirable than anything Deseem could imagine.

"Deseem..."

He stopped the whispered protest with a kiss to his husband's neck. It was gentle but strong and he quickly followed it up with more. Deseem let his hands rest on the tense shoulders as he kissed his way to the tight, unhappy mouth. It was as if his kiss was its own sort of magic. Liam's folded arms melted away, his lips parted and softened under it and Deseem took full advantage. The longer the kiss lasted, the deeper it grew, the more eased Liam's shoulders became. When Deseem finally broke the kiss, Liam's hands were lightly circling his waist, holding him close.

If Deseem could have thought of an easy way to strip off Liam's boots and uniform pants he would have. He just wasn't sure how to make someone remove their boots while they were standing in them. "Get naked for me." He asked without making it a request or question but too softly to be an order. When Liam didn't move to obey he slipped his hand just under the opened fabric of the black pants and glided his fingers around the top of his husband's hips. "Please?"

It was the whispered please that got Liam moving. Deseem rarely asked for anything and he'd made it a habit to comply if he could. He was pulling his boots away and stepping out of his clothing before he was really thinking about it. It was an advantage Deseem was aware of and wasn't above exploiting. He turned a little to the side as he untied his braids and shook them out.

When he glanced back, Liam was nude. Fully nude, his hair falling down his back and over one arm a little but hiding nothing and it stopped Deseem where he stood. He drank in the sight of his husband, exposed and passive as he rarely ever was and knowing that such a man was his husband made Deseem shake his head in awe.

"They're wrong. You're more beautiful than winter, than snowflakes." He whispered.

"Gawky, albino pale, freakish maybe but not beautiful." Liam grinned a little with a smile coated in bitterness.

Deseem shook his head. "No, beautiful..." He couldn't quite bring himself to ask for what he wanted, instead he took Liam's hand again and guided him to their bed. Carefully he patted the edge and hoped Liam would understand.

If he did, he was being deliberately stubborn and instead of laying down, Liam merely sat on the edge of the bed. The stubbornness was part of what Deseem liked most about Liam and it made him smile softly in quiet amusement. He wasn't a fool, he knew that Liam's stubbornness would be, at times, a source of frustration and conflict but for right now it was so essentially Liam that it made him smile. He smiled as he leaned down and kissed the now more accepting lips and was still smiling as he slipped a step away to quickly and carelessly strip away his own clothing.

When he returned he reclaimed the tender lips but he leaned closer, moved closer and by so doing forced Liam to slide further back onto the bed. As his hands ran over the exposed chest he gently guided Liam back away from the edge until even the long legs were all the way up. It took a little guidance of touch and kiss but Deseem got Liam to lay down, almost, his mind provided him, on the very spot he'd rested upon on their wedding night. His hands petted Liam's sides as he leaned them down and finally got his husband to really lay on the bed, stretched out, naked and waiting for him.

For the first time since he was taken to the bed, Liam let go of it and reached out. His fingers trailed through Deseem's loose hair, catching on the waves and curls that knotted around his touch. "I don't think we should..."

"Stop thinking."

"I..."

He stopped the protests with another kiss, one that didn't linger. Instead he let his mouth wander. Generally, Liam didn't stay still like this for long when they shared pleasure. He tended to want to touch and kiss back too much, tended to move them around the bed too much and Deseem found that having Liam passively accepting whatever he did was as heady as a strong wine. His mouth wanted to taste the exposed, waiting, pale skin and he soon was nipping at collarbones and lapping softly at the hollow of Liam's throat.

Maybe it was the swirl of emotions, the extremes of ups and downs. Or maybe it was having Liam so pliable and willing, so accepting of whatever Deseem offered without making demands of his own. Whatever it was, Deseem was aching, trembling with need than made his feel fevered. He wanted to pleasure Liam as he'd been pleased that first night, to touch him and kiss him so intimately, but his body was desperate.

He had learned quite a bit about what Liam liked and didn't like over the weeks since their marriage had become more physical. Deseem was a fast learner and proud that he knew how to touch his husband to earn gasping moans even when the man was being stubborn. Without mercy, Deseem exploited all he knew and Liam's hand slipped from his hair to clutch at the covers below them.

Deseem pressed a kiss to Liam's stomach, flat and strong, and he wanted to kiss lower. He wanted to try to return that special kind of kiss that Liam seemed to enjoy offering so much and Deseem knew he enjoyed receiving. The thought made his skin feel feverish and he was worried if he did he'd lose what small fragments of control he still held. Or worse, he'd get it wrong and ruin the moment. He didn't want to risk ruining anything and he was already planning to do more than he'd ever done.

Instead of trailing kisses lower, he pulled away a little. Deseem let his hands trail lazily over Liam's stomach, up over his chest and delighted in how wonderful it was to touch so boldly. It made him feel like he could fly if he just only tried.

"Lift your hips." Deseem whispered as he reached over and gathered some of their pillows up.

"Deseem..."

"Shhh..." He petted a tense hip and watched how the soft touch made his husband's manhood twitch. Liam, for all his protests, was as aroused as Deseem was. Their time for tease and play would be short if he wanted to complete Norlan's suggestion. "Lift your hips for me..."

Liam's face blushed bright red, brighter than the flush of desire and passion. It crept up his neck and brightened his face but he lifted his hips as asked and let Deseem slide pillows under his back. "Oh Lady bless..." He half moaned and turned his face away. "Deseem...I..."

"It's okay. I won't hurt you. I would never hurt you, I promise." The irony of being the one doing the comforting, of being the one doing the reassuring, wasn't lost on Deseem. He smiled softly at the sudden reversal of their normal roles as he reached to the table by the bed to get the right glass bottle. It was a bottle he could find with ease now and knew well enough what to do with its contents.

The glass bottle made a soft clinking sound in the otherwise painfully silent room and Liam's feet shifted on the bed. "Deseem...I don't think I can do this right now..." One of Liam's hands came up to cover his eyes. "It's just been such a...a rough day...I...oh oh gods....oh..."

He didn't bother trying to soothe Liam's protests this time, Deseem just used actions. There was a nagging worry in the back of his mind and he thought if he paused long enough to think about it he'd lose his nerve and not continue. So he acted before he could think about it too much and simply glided an oil slick finger to his husband's entrance. It was a spot he hadn't quite dared

touch, not in all of their encounters.

It pleased him that the light, circling, teasing touch was enough to make Liam's words moan away to nothing. When he pressed the touch more firmly Liam's breathing stuttered and it was enough to embolden him to let the oil slick digit enter his husband's body. He had been told by his husband directly and by Norlan that Liam enjoyed being taken by another man but some part of Deseem's mind hadn't really believed it. Of course he was supposed to enjoy it, he was Bentan after all and a wife and bride and it was a blessing from God that he'd found pleasure in his husband's joining their flesh but for his husband to enjoy the reversal of their roles awed him. There was no doubt Liam enjoyed the touch as he moaned low in his throat and dug his heels into the bed to push his hips harder against Deseem's hand.

Hearing the moans, watching the small, contained, almost shy writhing made Deseem feel like he was on fire. So much so, that he was unaware of adding another finger, of rushing his husband further along, faster than he had intended. "I love hearing you." He whispered his confession and the words made Liam whimper a little but the hand stayed locked over his blue eyes.

Deseem had teased too long. His body hurt and he was certain if he watched the display of such consuming needing passion for a moment more he might go blind from the sheer delight it triggered. The oil was still slick on his hand and he soothed it over his own aching length. It was necessary but the touch made him tremble. He doubted he would ever get used to how good it could feel to touch himself when so hard. The last thing he needed at that moment was more pleasure and he got the oil on his length as quickly as possible.

"Ohh...gods..." Liam moaned softly when Deseem gathered up the long legs. "I can't...I..."

The begging voice was shaking now and Deseem paused long enough to reach up and pull the shielding hand away from his husband's eyes. White lashes fluttered and blue peeked out but while they were glistening brighter than normal, they were also begging to continue. Deseem had slipped forward, his length was throbbing, so close to taking his husband but he paused, lost in those eyes.

Liam licked his lips. "Please." He whispered so softly the falling snow outside almost smothered it. "Please..."

The soft plea made Deseem lightheaded. He heard his heart pounding in his ears but he never once broke eye contact as he pushed his hips forward. All he had to go on was his experience in the opposite position, of being taken instead of being the one doing the taking. Norlan had offered to explain but Deseem had been too embarrassed by the mere suggestion of taking Liam. He knew how it felt to be taken but nothing could have prepared him for how it felt to feel his husband's body ease and accept him as they joined together as one.

"Oh God have mercy upon us..." Deseem moaned in Bastion not Trade as his hips plunged him all the way, deep into the fiery heat of his husband's body. Under his hands he felt Liam's legs trembling, all of the paler man's body was trembling like a rope under too much tension. He thought he might pass out from pleasure and he arched his back and tossed his head back as he struggled to adjust to the new sensations.

It broke eye contact with Liam for only a moment but when he was stable enough to hold onto his control and meet those eyes, Deseem was surprised to see tears silently leaking from both corners. The tears slipped down the side of Liam's face and were quickly lost in the tumbles of white hair and they surprised Deseem enough that he almost stopped. He would have if he hadn't made such a study of his husband. There was no doubt Liam wasn't in pain, his body was shivering in pleasure. Every slight touch of Deseem's hand to his skin had him moaning and trembling, arching up a little to beg for more contact. His husband's length was red, swollen and aching with the need for release. Every outward sign was that Liam was lost in pleasure but the

tears continued to silently fall from the very bewildered blue eyes.

Deseem saw it then, in those eyes. The sheer exhaustion from having to always be strong, always be in control. The weariness of being alone and isolated mixed with the weight of crushing grief. It was in those eyes that he saw something breaking and falling away, some fear or distance, some barrier that had stood between them. If Liam hadn't softly wept during such an emotional upheaval Deseem would have worried.

Now that he knew it was okay, he accepted the soft tears as he accepted the hungry moans as he slipped his body away from his husband's and glided back into the tight pleasure. It was amazing, stunning and left Deseem moaning too as he lost himself in the act of claiming his husband as his own.

"Hus...husband..." Deseem panted out, desperate now. He was feeling like he might faint and wasn't sure if that was normal. The lightheaded buzzy feeling was only getting stronger the closer to release he came and he knew he was very, very close. "Please...touch your...yourself...please....I want to...God please...see you...feel...feel you...please..." He begged, not even aware of how hard he was taking Liam now, how quickly his hips were snapping and only knowing he needed.

It was a request Liam often made of him but this time he was making it. Deseem watched as a trembling hand released the covers and took a desperate grip on his own neglected length. It was beautiful to watch as Liam stroked himself, moaning, shivering, moving to meet every claiming thrust. Deseem was grateful that Liam seemed as close to release as he was because there was no way he could withstand such a sight for long.

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Chapter Seventy Two

And then it was too much. It became one thrust too many, one stroke of hand over flesh too much, one sigh, one moan, one tear more than either man could stand. Liam moaned, low, dark, with a hungry, broken sound to the pleasure and his body arched and writhed. He came with no shyness, with no masks and nothing hidden and Deseem knew it was a moment he'd never forget. It was something he had done, something he had finally managed to give his husband and it was exquisite.

Liam's release during their normal lovemaking was nice but generally Deseem was too occupied with coming down from his own climax to really do anything more than notice. Now their positions were reversed and see his husband, feeling his husband tumble into shuddering pleasure almost undid him. He clung to his control because he wanted the moment to last a second, a single heartbeat more. He wanted to feel every bit of pleasure he could as Liam's body shuddered in waves and clutched at him, refusing to let them part even for a heartbeat.

It was perfection and Deseem clung to it with every scrap of his will. Liam was crying in earnest now, tears flowing but the only sounds he made were gasping moans of pleasure. It was too much and his body was quaking now, his pulse pounding in his ears, his head light and a fire throbbed in his veins. The only way to survive it was to let go and with a moan Deseem did just that.

Liam dared to crack his eyes open as he spiraled down from his own pleasure. It was a sight he was glad he had dared to steal because it was stunning. Deseem's black hair was spilled everywhere, clinging to his fevered skin like a thousand caresses. The younger man had put on weight but was still lean, still unfinished looking but as attractive as always. Only now there was something more, as Liam panted, exhausted, broken in ways he didn't think he could be broken anymore, he saw Deseem differently. In that glowing moment as he his body began the long glide back to normal and Deseem's tipped over the edge into release he saw Deseem as more than the damaged, lost, young man that needed a protector, that needed someone to shelter him. In that perfect instant as tears escaped his eyes against his will, Liam saw that Deseem was someone that could be both those things as well as needing them. It made something inside his soul feel snapped, broken and raw but it wasn't an unwelcome feeling.

All he wanted to do was pull Deseem down into his arms and hold the younger man. The tears hadn't shown any sign of stopping but Liam wasn't actually crying, he just couldn't get the tears to stop. He suspected that if he laid inside of Deseem's arms, bodies pressed together, that maybe the tears would stop then. Watching was too much and Liam closed his eyes, sinking into the wonder of the unexpected moment.

He sighed and eased deeper into the bed, melting in comfort and, yes, if he was going to be honest, love. It was a place and feeling he could have floated in forever and would have until he drifted to sleep if his skin didn't tingle and his magic sparked a glowing warning. It was the feel of an attack a breath before it arrived. Old instincts he thought soothed sprang awake and he mentally grabbed his magic and pushed back. The room burst into flames around them, a perfect explosion of flame outside of a three foot ring about where they lay.

Liam scrambled to get his legs under him but it wasn't an outside attack. Deseem fell to the bed limply, unconscious. His eyes were open but rolled up and showed only white. "Lady bless!" Liam cursed and scurried over the bed covers to gather Deseem up. As he got a hand on the fevered skin he reached out with his own magic and pushed the flames down but it was a fruitless effort. For each place he smothered, a new one burst into flames. The bed curtains were engulfed now, the curtains over the door, as were the bed frame itself and the wardrobe. Simply putting the fires out wasn't going to be enough.

Blocking someone else's magic wasn't a simple or easy task. It required being stronger than the person you were trying to control, being better trained or catching them before they could actively use it. Active magic was much harder to shut down than simply trying to block someone that had magic but wasn't lashing out. Liam scrambled along his husband, touching him with energy alone and looking for the spot and feel that said 'this is firestarting' and soon found it. The spot was surprisingly strong, wild, unfocused but strong and Liam quickly threw his own energies over it to smother the power and get it under control.

The fires in the bedroom went out under Liam's magic and this time they stayed out. He coughed under the surprisingly thick smoke and glanced around their bedroom at the blackened wood and charred fabric. "Wow..." He whispered. "Guess you found your magic again..." He half laughed and moved to sooth the dark hair back from the unconscious face and try to rouse Deseem.

Under his touch Deseem arched. His body arched and convulsed and he made a horrible moaning sound. Below them the ground shivered, twisting in a bucking arching motion to match the twisted seizure Deseem's body was enduring. Hail began to pound against the garden doors and the light outside disappeared under clouds that had suddenly gone black. Liam gathered

Deseem in his arms and felt it all unraveling but it twisted away too quickly for him to control. The stone of the walls burst into flames, the rocks themselves danced with flame and that made Liam's eyes go wide because it was impossible because he had Deseem's firestarting locked down.

He felt it, but didn't believe it and that single instant of doubt was one instant too many. "Shit!" He cursed and curled his body over Deseem's limp and naked one a second before the wood of the bedposts broke into a thousand splinters and exploded. It was a nasty trick, one he'd used many times himself, but it was exhausting to make wood split apart and repeal itself.

Liam had two choices, focus on stopping those splinters or focus on stopping Deseem. He curled around his husband and let the splinters pierce into his side, into his leg and shoulder. It was just pain, it was just blood, he would survive but the ground below was heaving again as Deseem moaned and convulsed, as the hail grew large enough that glass on their door suddenly broke under the force.

A talent of magic was like a flow of water. It required a pathway and if that pathway was blocked the flow stopped and the user was blocked and shut down and unable to manifest anything. A good, well trained talented person could pick at the blocks and eventually make a pinhole and a pinhole was enough to surge at and shatter the rest of the blockage. That took training, practice, focus and skill, all things Deseem didn't have but he was setting fires. It left Liam scrambling trying to find his husband's talents and close them down but it was like trying to carry water in a bucket missing it's bottom.

"Shit...." He whispered when the truth sunk in. Liam had faced many a talented person who had tried to block one or even two of his talents. It worked on someone that simply had multiple talents but he was an Elemental. If someone locked up his firestarting, it simply flowed back into the knot that was Elemental magic and used another pathway to reach the surface. It was why they had such difficulties locking him down when his magic had appeared because it took so many different Watchers to pin all his pathways down because even a small opening in one allowed all his magic to pour out.

Which was exactly what was happening now and Liam's mind struggled to believe it. He reached over the obvious, took his magic beyond the easy to see and easy to find pathways and followed them upstream. Impossibly so, at the center was a warmth and power Liam knew intimately because it was mirrored inside his own energies. No one had ever directly blocked an Elemental before and he touched that power with great caution.

The small contact caused Deseem to convulse again, harder this time, more violently. The ground didn't just shiver this time, it bucked and things fell, burning things tumbled and spread fire and smoke further. Liam didn't notice it because as Deseem spasmed, his head slammed forward and smashed into Liam's face. The blow landed with enough force that Liam saw stars. His eye and nose lit up with pain but it was just pain and he could deal with that. It was too much, he was bleeding and hurt and the room was filled with smoke swirling around the cold air pouring in from the broken doors, outside their bedroom door Baxter was barking like mad and Liam knew it had to end.

He couldn't be gentle or uncertain. This time he reached out with all his strength and there was no gentle careful touching. He brutally smothered Deseem's magic with his own, wrapped it in woven layers and layers of buffering energy, coated it and sealed it tightly down so not even a whisper could escape. It would leave them both with massive headaches, he knew it but it worked.

The ground stopped shivering. This time when Liam put the fires out they stayed out and when he reached out and up he unknotted the chaos that had brought such horrible hail down on their heads. Most importantly, as soon as Deseem was safely contained and controlled, his body fell limply and the seizures stopped. Liam coughed and choked but he used the broken glass doors

as a means to gather the heavy smoke and force it from the room to clear the air.

Liam coughed again, choking on the fresher air and everything suddenly hurt. "Aw shit..." He moaned as he spit out blood. For all his wounds he was more worried about the now still and shallowly breathing Deseem. They needed help, he had to find them help and for not the first time Liam envied his brothers Mindspeech. Even a small touch of it would have been very useful.

Carefully he rested Deseem down onto the only patch of the room that wasn't half destroyed and tried to get off the bed. The urgency and panic had made him forget the dozens of small wood spikes stuck in his body but as he moved they pulled and tore more. "Shit...shit...shit...bloody hell!" He cursed and staggered off the bed. Every instinct said to pull the wood out but he knew it would cause things to bleed more and most likely leave smaller splinters embedded in the wounds.

The door to the main room was warped a little from having one side of it remain normal and the other side become charred. Liam groaned as he pulled on it and it finally sprang open. Baxter rushed in, barking unhappily with a scolding tone as he circled Liam.

"I'm fine, I'm fine go, Baxter, guard Deseem, go!" He ordered and the dog whined unhappily but rushed to the bed and hopped up on it. Every step hurt but Liam pushed himself to move into the cooler room. He got the pull cord to call a servant, yanked it enough times to make sure they knew it was urgent before he staggered to the door.

Only it flew open before he could touch it and Lach and a handful of people, some servants some Watchers stood behind him. Liam stood dumbly for a moment, unsure if he was seeing what he was seeing because no one moved.

"Gods...Liam..." Lach stepped forward a little. "Where's Deseem?"

It was then that Liam remembered that they would have all assumed it was he that had snapped. They'd automatically assume he'd lost control and maybe done something horrible to his husband. Being a bloodied mess and ass naked at the door didn't do much to help convince them otherwise.

"It...it wasn't me." The words spilled out. "Deseem...he needs a Healer...he's locked down...I..." He turned to guide them back into the room to where his husband lay waiting but his foot slipped in the blood that had pooled around his injured leg. He fell, hard and groaned in pain.

That broke the tension. Lach rushed into the room and knelt down. "Easy, it's okay, Healers are on the way too..."

"Not me! Not me!" Liam snapped out and knocked concerned hands away. "I'm fine, Deseem...he..." He struggled to stand but everything hurt now. "He's like me...I...gods..."

A woman in Watcher black knelt down to where Liam was trying to get his body to behave. "He's in shock." She said to Lach. "We should seal him while we can."

Reluctantly, Lach nodded agreement. Liam couldn't even blame his brother, he'd have agreed too if their roles had been reversed. He couldn't even disagree about being in shock because the woman's words were slow to sink in. By the time he understood what they were planning, her magic was already slithering over his mind trying to contain him and Liam felt the soft, skillful, almost unnoticeable touch of the other Elemental talents along his energies. He'd always known that when he was home, his parents and Lach kept at least one strong Watcher in each of the elemental talents on hand and ready to be able to work together to shut him down.

"No...NO!" Liam shouted and pushed back far harder than he really needed to. It made his head

throb and his ears ring but he couldn't stand to have even a temporary block on his magic any more. This time it was even more important. He was the only one capable of keeping Deseem safely contained and if they shut him down it was only a matter of moments or hours until Deseem lashed out again. "It's not me, you idiots!" He shoved Lach's hands away and groaned as he stood and felt more wounds tear. "Deseem..." He muttered as he hobbled to the bedroom.

Lach followed carefully but stopped at the threshold between the perfectly tidy and neat room and blackened chaos. "Deseem did this?"

Liam just rolled his eyes and groaned. "Baxter down." He ordered, calling off the dog. "We need a Healer..." He repeated as he gathered the sides of the coverlet and wrapped them around Deseem's nude body. "We need a Healer..." He sighed again and let himself stumble against the chard bedcovers but he wasn't just asking for Deseem now, he was asking for himself as he noticed the blood sliding down his skin.

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Chapter Seventy Three

Lach wasn't lying when he said Healers were already on their way. A small squad of them arrived so quickly that Liam suspected that they were part of the emergency plan of what to do if he went mad. It disturbed him that so many Healers showed up, certainly more than would be needed to care for him, and it spoke to the kind of damage they had expected him to do. He'd made Lach shoo the Watchers out because he was hurting and on edge and needed them removed but he'd also allowed Lach to stay in the ruined bedroom and even accepted a blanket from him even though he wasn't cold. He was grateful for it when the room suddenly filled with people again.

There was suddenly swirls of people and shouting concerns and too much movement. It made Liam's already throbbing head worse and his stomach churn. He was growing faint and it wasn't from blood loss because he hadn't lost that much, rather it was from shock and all the fuss was making him feel worse.

"Shut up!" He finally shouted and the room went gratefully silent. Some of the Healers even scurried from the room, seeking cover from an attack that didn't arrive. "No one is moving him from my sight. Do you understand?" He forced out but he wasn't sure how much of a threat it was when he wasn't sure how long he'd be conscious.

It was Jan that pushed her way into the room and moved across the wreckage with hardly a blink for it. She came over to where Liam was propped up against the bed and knelt down in front of him. "Liam, you're in shock, you're going to pass out if you don't let us help you, and Deseem is too. We need to move him to someplace warm, it's cold in here."

Liam saw her breath puffing and knew it was true but he felt fevered. "He's not leaving my sight.

They don't understand."

She brushed some of his hair back from his face. "You've broken your nose again. Here, let Lach carry Deseem and we'll get you on your feet. We'll clear everyone away and take you two across the hallway. There's an empty suite there, I have the servants heating it up now. It'll be clean and warm and we can work on you both there. Okay?"

Part of his mind screamed that it was a trap but he saw only honesty in Jan's eyes and Jas stood by Lach in the doorway. "Clear them away first...."

Jas nodded and turned. "You heard him get away, all of you, shoo, now shoo!" She pushed and motioned and there was a great deal of shuffling feet and conversation but it quickly fled away. When Jas reappeared she was nodding. "They're all at the end of the hallway."

Lach took that to be his cue and came over and started gathering Deseem's bundled up body into his arms.

"Can you...?"

"I got him, it's okay." He nodded.

Liam drew his strength around him and struggled to stand. Jan moved to help but as Liam slipped Jas rushed over to get on his other side. "We could have gotten you a stretcher..." Jan sighed but helped Liam balance.

"I'm fine. How far?"

"Not far..."

It wasn't a lie but it felt like miles out of the room and a few yards down the hallway to the other set of rooms. Jan wanted to put Liam down in the outer room but he refused and followed Lach into the bedroom. He didn't care if he had to be placed on the floor, which he had to be, so long as he was still within eyeshot of Deseem. When Jan pulled at the blanket he'd been holding around his shoulders he clung to it.

"No, Deseem first..."

"Liam, let me see..." She tugged and he gave in and let her pull the blanket open. Jan's lips turned down into a frown and she ran a hand over Liam's left side, sensing every spot of damage and every piece of wood impaled into flesh. "I need to bring in other Healers, Liam. You're going to need some work here and we're going to have to put you under."

"No! They'll block me if I'm out..." He was starting to shiver and that was not a good sign combined with the floating disconnected feel of his head.

"They won't, I promise." Lach offered.

Liam shook his head. "Not good enough...too important...I can't...Jan just stabilize me and fix Deseem..."

"I don't think that's a good idea." She soothed.

"Wait!" Jas chirped. "Wait, I know...Jan stabilize him some. Lach send for Norlan, tell him Liam needs a guard so he rest, he'll understand."

A look was shared between the three. "Okay." Lach agreed and moved to hurry from the room, trying not to knock down the Healers hovering in the outer room and the servants trying to make

a room long since closed off and not used liveable again.

"Stubborn man, you're getting your way so relax and let me get you on solid ground." Jan muttered and reached out her hands.

Liam got his right arm moving and caught her wrist. "Don't put me out." It was a question and a worry and a threat all rolled into one.

She nodded. "I promise now shut up and let me work so I can get to Deseem."

Jan was true to her word. She stabilized Liam and dulled some of the pain but otherwise left him be. She even left it to Jas to get the blanket wrapped around him as she moved to sit on the bed and try to figure out what was wrong with Deseem. It wasn't a simple problem and when she saw it she pulled away.

"Jas, come see this, tell me I'm not crazy..." She whispered to her sister and was grateful when she came to sit beside the unmoving young man.

It didn't take Jas long to refocus on the word around her and her eyes went wide. "Talent shock but...gods..." She glanced down to where Liam was propped against a chair and knew she looked as shocked as she felt.

Liam chuckled a little. "Told you... he did that... he's like me..."

"Liam let us work on you, please." Jan whispered.

He only shook his head. "He was having seizures, is he okay?"

"Deseem will be fine so long as you keep him locked down. We understand now, please, let me call in a couple more people to help and let us take care of you."

"No...no... I don't trust them..."

The door to the bedroom opened and Lach stepped in. He was followed closely by Norlan and behind Norlan came a half dozen others. All were from the North, dressed for winter battle with fur wrapped boots and heavy cloaks over their shoulders. Only a Clansman was crazy enough to start a campaign with feet of snow on the ground, and the colors of grey, white and dark blue in their clothes would blend in perfectly to a winter forest. Each member had sections of their hair tied back and close range weapons in hand. Short swords with wickedly sharp points and short spears and small shields made them ready for battle.

Norlan moved quickly over to kneel in front of Liam and ghosted his hand across the younger man's face. He frowned at the cool, clamminess of the pale skin. "Liam, you're bleeding everywhere and you look like a pin cushion."

"Deseem...he's..."

"I know, we know. By our honor and our blood, no harm shall come to you or your husband while we breathe." The vow was serious and spoken in Clanspeak. There were grunts of agreement from the men and women behind him and a small amount of weapons being rattled. Norlan leaned forward and kissed Liam's forehead gently a moment before he cuffed the side of the younger man's head with the hand that had been touching softly. "Now stop being stupid and let them work on you."

Liam saw the protective fire in Norlan's eyes and he saw the same fierceness in the eyes of the

Clansfolk behind him. It was a risk but he trusted their honor more than he trusted his own. Slowly, Liam nodded. "Okay but only put me out for as long as is necessary. I need to be awake to keep Deseem contained."

"Thank all the gods! Finally some sense." Jan tossed her hands up and Jas moved to the door to get the Healers that had been waiting to help. "Only as long as necessary to pull all these splinters out of your hide, I promise." She put a hand on his forehead. "Now sleep..." It took a moment because even though he had agreed, Liam still fought her a little but Jan soon overwhelmed him and dropped Liam into blissful unawareness.

"He looks tired." Liam heard as he drifted awake, a damp cloth was being soothed over his face and it felt nice but the deep rumbling voice was odd.

He had to pry his eyes open and force them to focus to accept who it was sitting by him on the bed. "Father?" It took a couple of blinks, but he got his vision cleared enough to see around the strange room. More chairs had been brought and it wasn't just his father. His mother sat nearby, Lach and Bekka, Jas and Jan all sat around. Norlan stood with his back against the door, a sure sign the rest of the Clansfolk were filling the outer room. What shocked Liam the most was seeing Malcome standing by the window and Celeste seated next to Bekka.

"I'm right here." Korin spoke gently. "You should still be asleep."

"Did I..." Liam looked to Jan. "Did I crack my head so I'm seeing things?"

Malcome snorted but didn't look away from the window.

"You took a pretty good crack to your face but no, you're not seeing things." She answered smoothly. "As promised, you've been out not a moment longer than needed."

He let his head fall back onto the pillows. "Deseem?"

"Is fine, we have him resting quietly."

"And me?" His left side hurt but was dulled by the Healer's magic.

"They fixed you up fine." Korin soothed.

Liam didn't want comfort, he wanted the truth. "Tell me."

Jas nodded. "They pulled twenty six splinters out of your side, shoulder, back and legs, mostly the left side. Twenty one of them were over two inches long. You've a broken nose and black eye as well. The Healers focused on the punctures, most are at least half Healed, but you're going to be sore and will have to take it easy for a while. Your nose is set and Healed enough to hold it in place but its going to be painful for a while and they pretty much left the black eye be."

"Thank you." He sighed. Another question floated to the front of his thoughts. "What's everyone doing here?"

A look was shared around the room but it was his mother that spoke. As was often the case, she was the one to deliver difficult news. "A decision has to be made concerning Deseem."

Liam glanced to Norlan and saw the steady, too serious look on his face. Norlan never looked serious and it made him nervous to see. He struggled to sit up, not caring that things felt like they were tearing or that it hurt. "What do you mean, a decision?"

"A second Elemental is something that has to be discussed."

Liam glanced to where Deseem lay beside him on the bed, looking young and frail with dark circles under his eyes and an ashen quality to his skin. "What's to be discussed?" He glared at his mother. "He's the same man he was yesterday."

"No, he's not and you know that." Relena answered as gently as she could. "The Guardians are sending some representatives over. We'll discuss it when they arrive."

"There's nothing to discuss!" Liam started to snap back, no longer caring if they mistook his anger for a lack of control so long as they went away and left them be. He'd found something again, just barely had found something, and there was already talk that could threaten that.

Korin patted Liam's hand and the gesture was so tender, so parental, that it shocked Liam into shutting up. "It'll be okay, son, be at peace."

Whatever bitter statement or bold threat he was going to make, Liam swallowed. "You all could maybe not stare at us like we're some kind of odd animals. That might be a good start." He snipped back, but no one looked away and Lach shook his head.

It wasn't too much longer of a wait until a knock came on the door and Norlan opened it an inch. Words were whispered back and forth before he allowed it to be opened. In walked not one or two but three Guardians and, from the amber and red lines painted around their ankles, they were elders too. Everyone in the room stood up, even Korin from Liam's bedside, and most moved out of the way.

"Thank you for joining us." Relena was the first to break the silence once the door was shut again.

"We are honored to offer our council." The center Guardian answered, a woman with only slight curves to breast and hips to mark her blue skinned form as anything different than the males that flanked her.

One of the male elders broke from the group and walked over to where Deseem lay sleeping. He brushed one hand across Deseem's face and forehead, sharp nails catching against skin softly. They left not a single mark. "It is as we knew." He said to the group.

"Two Elementals, bound together by treaty and law. Unheard of." She whispered and locked dark deep blue eyes to Liam's ice blue.

"Something must be done." Relena said softly. "It's been suggested that one Elemental is one too many and two is too great a risk. There already has been a discussion of asking you and your people to permanently lock down Deseem's magic."

Liam sat up straighter. "What?"

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Chapter Seventy Four

A look passed between the elders and the one still petting Deseem's forehead glanced to Liam. It took a moment but the woman eventually spoke. "That would not be a valid option. We would not do it and it is our belief that Liam would never allow it."

"My son is a Prince of the kingdom and a Watcher on top of that. He will follow his orders and uphold his oaths." Relena answered firmly.

"Perhaps, you do not know your son as well as you believe you do. The mask is not an oath of blind obedience but an statement of the weight of a soul." The elder scolded. "It is a moot point, we will not do such."

"The boy could become a Watcher. He's old to begin training but an exception could be made."

"And if he does not have the inclination for such?"

Relena glanced to the bed where her son was glaring daggers at her but her newest son lay sleeping as gently as a lamb. "What he carries inside him is too dangerous to be allowed to go unchecked. He will become a Watcher or be contained."

The female elder tilted her head and her ears stuck out at a sharper angle. "None shall come to the mask against their will. It is not how it is."

The elder by the bed glanced up again. "It may be in this one to be a warrior, he is not weak, but he is not Corena."

"He is Corena by marriage."

"But his soul is not. He is claimed by Another and there would be no room to follow the Death Queen's path." The elder by the bed went back to gently petting Deseem's hair back.

"So if you will not contain him and he can't be made to be a Watcher, what are we to do? He's a risk, a threat. Two Elementals..." Relena shivered, it was a thought from a nightmare.

"He must be trained by a suitable mentor." The female elder spoke softly but her eyes were no longer on the queen but on Liam.

"I can do that." He volunteered. "No one else alive can teach an Elemental what they are. I had to learn it the hard way, I can teach him."

"Can you separate affection from the rough road a mentor must walk?"

"Yes."

"You can not be soft on him, or allow him to be weak."

Liam lifted his head a little and his chin stuck out in stubborn pride. "Forgive me elder, but no one, not even yourself, need remind me of the dangers of this magic and weakness. I know what control it takes."

She nodded but dropped her eyes. "It is not so simple. If he should go rogue? If he should be

unable to carry the weight of so much power?"

It wasn't a happy thought. "If that happens, I will do a mentor's job and see he isn't a threat to anyone."

"Can you kill him if you must? If it is necessary?"

"I..." Liam glanced down and knew he couldn't lie to a Guardian, there was no way he could lie to an elder. "It would destroy me as well but I will do what I must. If it comes to such a place, neither of us would survive."

"Very well. There is your solution. If the boy chooses to seek the mask it will be of his own will. He has a proper mentor, one uniquely suited to helping him."

"But, the threat?" Relena started to protest but three pairs of deep blue eyes locked onto her and her words dried up.

"Watcher Liam, we ask a great deal of you." The female elder spoke but her eyes stayed on the queen. "Know we will be of service to you however we can."

"Thank you." Liam whispered. The Guardians were making a stand and backing him up. It was an active stance and one they rarely took and it made him shiver a little at all that it could mean.

"You see a threat. We see two beautiful gifts. You humans lack so much faith in one another." She grinned and showed teeth quite capable of rending flesh into tiny specks. "Watcher Liam has our blessing and permission to take an apprentice that is not a Watcher trainee and we would hope you and yours would be supportive as well. It is, in our wisdom, the best option. So long as Watcher Liam offers his oath to accept the responsibilities of mentor..."

"I do."

"His word is enough for us. Is it enough for you?"

It placed Relena in a difficult position. She couldn't well disagree. "It is. Liam shall mentor Deseem and train him, with your support." She tacked on to make it clear that it was only at the Guardians suggestion that they were agreeing. It was a foolish ruler that didn't listen when the Guardians wished to offer council.

The elder petting Deseem leaned over and patted Liam's arm. "You two, come see us when you're feeling better."

Liam nodded dumbly, overwhelmed and sore.

"So it is settled." The female elder declared. "Thank you for allowing us to offer our council." They moved as one to leave, the one hovering over Deseem offered one final petting touch before joining the other two and as smoothly as they'd arrived, they left.

As they went Liam felt like laughing. There was such a feeling of a weight, a worry that had been lifted and removed he thought he might float away. "Guess asking them for their advice was a bad idea." He couldn't stop himself from tossing out. For once enjoying the cold, fearful look in his families eyes. The only two not frightened were Bekka and Norlan, even Lach looked a little worried.

"We didn't ask them." Malcome snapped back. "They came over on their own."

That was too much and Liam actually did laugh. "Freak show is over, please, go away. I'm in a lot of pain and I don't know, I might snap and go on a rampage."

"Liam..." His father scolded.

He almost felt bad at snapping at his father when the man was making an effort. He would have too if he hadn't met his father's eyes and seen the same fear there that he saw in Malcome's eyes. His father was just better at hiding it. "And call off the emergency squad hovering around here somewhere waiting to shut us both down. They won't be needed."

"You're still a selfish little kid, you know that Liam?" Malcome tossed out as he stepped away from the window. "You still can't see anything beyond your own nose."

"I'm selfish now?" Liam's head spun a little as he tried to imagine how two treaty marriages and going to war made him selfish. "How do you even figure that?"

"We're trying here!"

"You're only here because you're scared I'll do something and you won't be here to help. You aren't here because you were worried about me you're here because you're afraid not to be!" Liam almost yelled back. "I'm a grown man, I don't require my family to pretend to be comfortable around me. Just don't shove my face in the distance between us." He rubbed his eyes gingerly, his swollen eye and broken nose throbbing in pain. "Now please, just go away."

There was some muttering and quiet words in the room around him but also shuffling of feet and movement. He didn't care if they thought he was being a selfish brat, so long as they just went away. The tears from before felt far too close to the surface and the last thing he needed was his family to see him breakdown.

A soft hand petted his head and a kiss was placed to the top of his forehead. For one painful second Liam hoped it was his mother. Some part of his heart desperately wanted her to love him as she had before he had to be judged as a threat. "We'll be back to see you when you've gotten some rest." It wasn't his mother's voice but Bekka's.

Liam dropped his hand and opened his eyes, expecting to see Bekka and Lach but instead it was Bekka and Celeste. They were holding hands and the his brother's wives had obviously made up their minds to not be totally driven away. It meant something but right now all he felt was the sting of pain that it wasn't his mother. "Thank you." He whispered and even managed a very, very small smile.

That tiny effort lit up Celeste's face into a beautiful smile and Bekka's own smile was maybe not as bright but just as warm. She patted him again before leading Celeste away to leave the room. It left him alone in the room with Jas and Jan, Lach and Norlan but it was the twins that came over first.

"We're going to be in the other room, but we'll give you some time alone. Okay?" Jas said softly.

Liam nodded.

"You need to sleep and when you wake up you're going to need to eat something." Jan warned.

"Deseem?"

"He'll sleep it off for couple more hours but we're letting him wake up on his own."

That was good. A Healer could force someone caught in shock from overuse of magic or the sudden appearance of their talents awake. They could force them to function and during the war Liam had often been the one forced to recover too quickly so he knew how horrid that made a body feel. Healed and allowed to sleep it off was the best option and he was glad they were

letting Deseem rest.

Before Jas could stand, he reached out and caught her hand. "Jas? Jan? Are we..." He glanced away and gathered his thoughts. "I'll understand if you want to pass our care to someone else."

Jas squeezed Liam's hand. "Don't be stupid."

The relief almost crushed him. Jas and Jan had never tried to hide or lie about how sometimes thinking about the power he held was frightening. He'd understood that because sometimes the thought of what he could do with a mere thought or a moment of lost control scared him silly but it was their very accepting honesty of both his and their own emotions that had earned his trust. He had a feeling that he was going to need that, that Deseem was going to need that, in the future.

"Thank you."

"Hush and get some rest. We'll be right on the other side of that door."

"Okay." He watched them leave but he wasn't alone, not yet. Lach hovered by the windows and Norlan stood by the door, carefully watching. He wasn't worried about Norlan but his attention was on his brother.

"Are you afraid of me too?" Some part of Liam had spent years waiting for Lach to realize that there family was right and he should be frightened too.

"Not of you, for you..." Lach whispered and came over to sit on the side of the bed. "He could have killed you."

"But he didn't."

"But he could have."

"Lach, I could have killed any number of the people that came to help me when my talents appeared but I didn't, neither did Deseem."

"Well the dozens of puncture wounds say differently."

"That was my fault. I didn't even think that he could be...I mean what are the odds of it?"

"Well, both our families have had strong talent for magic for generations, both have also had a great deal of children with elemental magics. It makes sense really and they do say like calls to like..." He glanced to where Deseem lay sleeping, looking innocent and peaceful and wondered if the same cynical bitterness that had made a home in Liam's eyes would find a place one day in Deseem's. "You've never mentored anyone before."

"There's never been an Elemental before." Liam needed Lach to understand. "I'm not the only one now, Lach, I'm not alone...I...there might be others one day."

"And if he shouldn't be able to handle it?"

"He'll be able to."

"Liam..."

"I'm not being blind or sentimental. In a lot of ways he's stronger than I am and, we'll have each other. He won't have to be alone with this. Are you frightened of him now?"

Lach glanced over to Deseem and to the protectiveness in his brother's eyes. "No." He admitted. "Not really, not of him or you but yeah, the power the two of you hold scares the shit out of me sometimes."

"I won't ask you to go against the family. I know they wanted to shut Deseem down."

"They're frightened. They'll come around."

"They've never come around to me."

"And you're not asking me to do anything. Even if you weren't my brother, I'm your Captain. The Guardians have said they wish one of my Watchers to take an apprentice who isn't a trainee. That's more than enough for me."

Relief washed over Liam and he had to close his eyes. "Gods, I was worried...I..."

"You're my brother. You're not getting away from me that easily." Lach grinned. "Get some sleep, you really are banged up and from the looks of things you're going to need your strength."

Liam wanted to tell Lach that he loved him but the words caught in his throat so he nodded. Lach always claimed his own magic was almost ineffective when it came to his own family and that he saw or heard little but this time he nodded. "I know little brother, me too." He whispered as he stood. "Me too."

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Chapter Seventy Five

That left just Norlan in the room, standing by the door looking like the fighter every man and woman raised in the north was. "Are you going to stay over there..."

"Maybe." Norlan muttered.

"Maybe?"

"Depends if you're pissed that I interfered."

"I should be but I'm tired. I don't like to be toyed with."

"I wasn't..." Norlan sighed and left his post by the door to come to Liam's bedside. "You're too stubborn. Words don't sink into your thick skull so you needed a push."

It was the timber of Norlan's voice, the scent of the outdoors that always seemed to follow him

and even the crooked unashamed guilty half smile smirk he so often wore that Liam couldn't stand. It broke his control where his mother's cold distance and his father's fear couldn't. All words dried up and he felt his hands and chin trembling as he blinked tears away.

"Hey now, hey, you're shaking. I am sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you. I've never meant to hurt you. All I wish is for you to be happy... here now." Norlan slipped forward to where he could gather Liam up into a hug but that only seemed to make Liam's control break even more. "Shhh, it's okay, it's going to be okay now..." Norlan soothed a hand over the shower of white hair as Liam sobbed in earnest against his shoulder.

"Ow..." Liam moaned. "It hurts to cry..."

"That's because your face is smashed." Norlan teased but he held on.

Liam sniffled a little and tried to swallow the spat of tears. "I'm so tired, Norlan, I'm so tired."

"I know." And he did, it wasn't about needing sleep. "I've been tired too." It was carrying the burden of loss and grief. "But I'm letting it go and you need to also."

"I don't kn...know how." His words hiccupped. "I just can't...I...can't always be..."

"Strong for everyone? Pulled together and composed?" He added and felt Liam nodded against his shoulder. "You had the best of both with us and I think you needed that. A chance to be strong for her and a chance to let go with me, it was wonderful but you have to let that go. Neither of us can go back." Norlan was blinking back his own tears now. "I miss it too but we can't go back."

"You told Deseem to take me." Liam whispered and knew he was blushing because he was pale skinned and every slightly embarrassing thought made him blush.

"Yes, I told him that you would never accept him as a partner, as a real spouse, until you knew he could protect you as much as you protect him. I told him that you need to give yourself to someone and if he wanted you, if he loved you, he would find a way to offer that shelter to you. It didn't have to be in bed, but that way would be easiest."

Liam laughed a little and winced. "But you didn't suggest another way."

"Why should I? He wants you very much, must be something about you..." Norlan almost purred but reminded himself that he had to stay away and let Liam build a new life, no matter the level of attraction still between them. "Did it work?"

"Yeah, we were...well...when things went a little sideways."

Norlan laughed. "Poor boy, first time taking you and he blows the room up!"

"It's not funny." Liam tried to sound annoyed but he was chuckling in a soft painful way as he leaned further against Norlan. His laughter dried up quickly and he found himself blinking away tears again as another thought bubbled up. "You were right. I need him too."

Norlan ran his hand over his former lover's head. "I know. It's because you're thick skulled and words do not sink in. Deseem could tell you for a hundred years that he cares for you and wants to support and love you and shelter you but you'd never once believe him. But if he tells you with his body, with pleasure and touch, you get it and understand. I told him that too."

Liam dug his fingers into Norlan's shirt and clung to him. "I miss her. I miss her so much, Norlan. I miss what we had, I can't breath sometimes for how much it hurts."

That chased his smirk away. "I know."

"How can I be fair to him when I hurt so much for her?"

"He is not a fool and not as young as his age. He understands." Norlan glanced to the sleeping boy over the man he held in his arms. "I think...I think maybe she brought him to you."

Liam heard the sorrow in the soft voice and he pulled away enough to look Norlan in the eyes. "That's silly, she wouldn't for one of us and not you. She loved you more and longer."

"But she knows I will heal and survive and find love again. Maybe not today or tomorrow but I will go on. She knew that, knows that, but you, our snowflake? You are more difficult and more fragile and she knows you would need some help." He shook his head. "Can you imagine a better partner for you? A beautiful, proud young man with the same magic you have? One that needs you and yet is strong enough to shelter you?"

"It does seem impossible doesn't it?"

"Not if she had a hand in it. Love him Liam, and be loved by him, find happiness and be happy. Promise me you'll stop being stupid and stubborn and try."

A promise to any Clansfolk was a serious deal. Liam nodded carefully. "I promise. If you promise not to interfere anymore."

"Hm, you needed it."

"Maybe." Which was about as much as he was going to admit. There was no way Liam could confess to anyone that having Deseem simply take him to their bed and, as Deseem said, claim his place as his husband, was just what some aching part of his soul had needed. "That isn't a promise."

Norlan pulled away a little further. "Nor will I make one. It is my duty to mess with your life if I think you're being stupid."

"Crazy Clansman." Liam muttered but as he gingerly wiped his face dry he found the tears had stopped and more, that he felt stable.

Norlan only smirked back but he leaned forward and pressed his lips to Liam's. The kiss was gentle and tender but not chaste. It was a kiss that should have led to further things but Norlan broke it and kissed either side of the young Watcher's face. "Rest, you need to heal and be strong again. Send for me if you need me, at any time. Even if your pretty husband needs more hands on advice on how to please my snowflake." He grinned wickedly.

"I doubt Deseem would approve." Liam muttered but he knew he was blushing bright red. The very thought of having both men felt lewd and sexy and wonderful.

"Perhaps not today but in a few months..." Norlan's grin widened.

"You're horrible."

"Aye." He swooped in and kissed the undamaged side of Liam's face. "I love you, Liam and I am very proud of you. Now rest, or I'll make those Healer-twins knock you out for a week."

He was tired and things were sore in a distant way. When he woke up he knew he was going to really be in pain but Jan was right outside the door and really, Liam could deal with pain. "Yeah, I'm tired. So go away, old man, and let me sleep."

Norlan patted Liam's head the way he would a small child. "Baxter is joining you two in here, he's driving everyone insane."

Liam nodded but laying down, being soothed and comforted and thinking maybe things would be okay, was lulling him to sleep. "kay..." He said around a yawn that made him wince. "Deseem will want to see him when he wakes..."

With a last knowing smile, Norlan eased himself out of the room and left the pair to sleep, softly, beside each other.

Deseem woke slowly and was lost in confusion. Everything hurt. His head pounded and throbbed in a burned horrible way and his body ached in painful soreness. For one awful moment he thought he'd been beaten again, that his father had stormed in to his rooms and taken his rage at others out on him but nothing felt broken and he didn't feel any bandages on his skin. If it wasn't his father, than the pain must be from the cleansing, it felt similar. Only that couldn't be it because his mind was functioning, it was just tender and sore.

He grasped at his memories and they tumbled over him. He wasn't with his father, his brother had stolen him. He wasn't with his brother, he had sold him in marriage. Only his husband was a good man, a wonderful man and they'd been building a good life, slowly, together. He fumbled over memories and tried to figure out how he came to be in so much pain.

Norlan had sat him down, told him things about his husband he wasn't sure he liked other men knowing. Things that made sense but that he didn't like having to discuss, things he'd done when Liam had come home and things he'd now seen in his husband's eyes. It felt like a dream, it felt amazing.

He'd taken his husband. He'd guided Liam to their bedroom and taken command of their lovemaking. Deseem had lain Liam down, submissive and still like he rarely was, and taken his husband the way he normally was taken. It had been like being reborn and not just for Deseem because he remembered seeing something fall away in his husband's eyes and he knew it had been as profound for Liam as it was for him. It wasn't just about pleasure it had been so much more.

That was a memory he didn't think he could forget but after that things had grown hazy. His skin had felt like it was on fire, burning in a hot way not in a painful way and he remembered feeling like something was ripping inside his head. After that things went black until awareness slowly came back as he lay on a soft bed. His first fear now was that something in the Healing that had been done to fix the damage from the cleansing had gone wrong. His second fear was that he was alone.

"Deseem?" Liam's voice whispered to him. "Are you awake?"

He blinked his eyes opened, squinted and focused. "Husband."

"I'm here."

"Yes you are." He sighed and closed his eyes. "Head hurts..."

"I can call a Healer."

"I'm fine." Deseem really saw Liam now, the half swollen eye and nose, the bandages around his shoulder and back. "What happened?"

"You don't remember?"

Deseem shook his head and reached out to touch the bruised side of Liam's face but even the gentle contact called up a wince.

"Makes sense, I didn't remember either. Just woke up and the world had changed."

That made Deseem frown. "We're naked in bed together but it isn't our bed."

"No, it's not. Deseem, something's happened, do you remember when Jas and the other Soulhealers said there was a possibility that fixing the cleansing might, maybe, give you back the magic you should have had?"

Magic, the word alone meant power and control and authority. It was why a wife had hers removed. He nodded but kept his mouth shut, fearful that his had returned and they'd had to cut it away from his mind.

"Well, it has, at a very awkward moment too." He knew the story of how Deseem came to find his power was going to spread and it was already making him blush.

"I'm sorry, my husband. I promise I will not touch it."

"No, no it isn't like that." Liam pulled the blanket he had about his shoulders a little tighter and Baxter whined as the edge was pulled out from under his belly. "Deseem, I...this is going to sound absurd but you're not just a little talented, you're a lot."

"Magic is strong in my line." He nodded.

"I know, but, it isn't just how strong you are talented. Deseem you aren't a Firestarter or a Windcaller or a Stonecypher like I thought you might be."

Liam's awkward stalling was making him nervous and Deseem sat up from where he'd been laying down to face whatever news it was. "Please, just tell me, my husband. I will accept it and whatever must be done because of it."

He took a deep breath. "You're an Elemental, Deseem, like me. You have all the elemental talents for magic but more, they're merged as one, they work together as one."

The truth surprised him so deeply he forgot about how badly his head was throbbing. "I'm...like you?"

"Yes."

"And the cleansing?"

"Left no noticeable signs of damage to your magic. I've been looking. We're even almost mirrored in strengths. My strongest skills are in Windcalling, Waterseeking, and Firestarting with Stonecyphering and Treesinging being weaker you are strongest in Stonecyphering, Treesinging and Firestarting with Windcalling and Waterseeking being your weaker aspects. It's amazing to see." His own magic echoed and responded to Deseem's in ways he'd never imagined, like different waves on the same tide, fluid and moving together. It made Liam itch for a chance to get Deseem taught and work with him on a project.

"I'm like you." The truth melted over him but didn't seem to belong to him. "But you're so powerful..."

"And so are you, or you will be once you're trained."

"But I'm...is this a mistake?"

Liam almost laughed. "No, it's not but you may wish it were. Gods know I have on more than one day."

Deseem shook his head and felt a horrible wash of fear come over him. "Please, have them keep me unaware when I am cleansed, please..."

"No, Deseem, no one is going to cleanse you. The Guardians have even refused to simply block your magic, no one is going to take this from you again. I promise. It's okay." Liam gathered Deseem's hands up between his own and found his thumbs stroking the inside of Deseem's wrists.

"You aren't...if my father had found out, if he'd known..."

"But he didn't and you're safe and it's okay, it's going to be okay. Elementals apparently appear oddly before the magic is active. I appeared nothing more than maybe a weak Firestarter, you must have looked similar before the cleansing. They didn't know and now you're here and my husband and it's okay." Now he wasn't alone and that odd hidden aspect of his magic before it appeared maybe wasn't his oddity but a trait of being an Elemental and normal. The ramifications of having two Elementals made him almost giddy in relief and worry.

Deseem only dropped his eyes down to where his hands were being so tenderly held. "What will happen to me now?"

It was a question Liam had never asked. He'd never had a doubt about his future. The moment it had been explained to him what magic he had, how powerful it was and rare and dangerous he knew his only course of action was to become a Watcher. It had been necessary not just because he was a Prince but because he had to prove to everyone he was trustworthy.

"Well, you have to train your magic and gain control over it. There's no avoiding that. You can ask to train to be a Watcher if you'd like. You're a citizen of Corena now and it's your right but the Guardians have declared that you don't have to receive training. Either way, I'm going to teach you, be your mentor."

"But I don't have to be a Watcher?"

"No."

"Good." He nodded. "Good, I do not believe I would be a good one." He frowned at Liam's smile. "I don't feel any different."

"You won't. I have you locked down right now. Here..." Liam reached out with his own energies and pushed a little against the sealed up spot inside Deseem's magic that was his talent.

"Oh!" Deseem's eyes went wide. "Oh that feels...feels odd...I..." He cocked his head to the side and tried to find the words.

"Whoa, don't push back." Liam laughed now, lightly and free when his own mentors would have scolded him for testing the protections they'd had on him. "We aren't ready for that yet."

"It's really there..."

Liam couldn't stand it any more, the look of awed wonder made him feel good. He'd been so scared during his first days, weeks, with his magic active. For Deseem to look secure, confident that he was going to stay safe and secure and okay made him happy, made him feel like maybe he could fix some of his own past by doing it right for Deseem.

He leaned forward and pressed his lips to Deseem's startled mouth. "It's really there."

Deseem pulled his hands free and caught the sides of Liam's face as he withdrew. The touch was rougher than he'd intended and Liam winced. "I shouldn't, I know I shouldn't but I love you. You're the only thing in this life that means anything to me, the only one I wish to know, the only thing that makes the day worthwhile. I will not speak of this again or ask you to return similar feelings but I needed you to know."

"I need some time. I'm trying...I care for you Deseem, more than I expect to but I need some time. I'm...I wasn't ready to meet someone new..."

He hated that Liam lowered his eyes like still healing and grieving was something to be ashamed of. "I know and I understand. It's okay, husband, it is."

"And about what you did...we did...just before..." He wasn't sure he was ready to tell Deseem he'd torn their bedroom apart.

"If you wish I won't again."

"No!" Liam glanced up. "No, I...I liked it. A great deal. Deseem I generally am, well, with another man I'm generally the one...gods I hate blushing."

Deseem smiled now, comforted to know something that had felt so good was proper and right. "I know, Norlan told me."

"Of course he did." Liam sighed. "It won't be easy, learning your magic. You're older than most people trying to learn and it's not easy, our talents especially."

"I'm not afraid of learning."

"I know you aren't. It's going to take years."

"I'm not going anywhere." Deseem nodded. "I want to learn so I don't do this to you again." He brushed a hand across the bandages on Liam's chest. "I did this, didn't I?"

"Yes, but it wasn't your fault."

"I never wish to do it again, I will learn."

"I can't be soft on you or gentle, not because of what we have behind closed doors." There was a reason why a mentor was forbidden from becoming involved with an apprentice.

"I understand."

Liam really believed he did. Deseem was used to the people with authority over him hurting him. Even his tutors, Liam had learned, would smack him with a stick if he didn't perform properly. "I won't be cruel but I am going to have to push you."

"And...when my family learns of this?"

He hadn't thought of that, gossip and rumors would spread and even if Deseem's talents were downplayed an ambassador from Bastion was expected to arrive in the spring. Word would reach Deseem's brother and father sooner or later. Liam squared his shoulders. "You are my husband, nothing short of death will part us and even if I fall, your place is here now. You'll be safe and honestly, once you're trained, they won't be able to hurt you ever again."

"I am your husband."

"You are."

Deseem smiled softly. "And you are mine."

"I am."

"That's all that matters." He sighed and settled back down under the covers. "The rest? We'll figure out together."

Deseem spoke with such confidence and assurance that Liam found himself laying down beside him. Their bodies curled around each other without thought, careful of the bandaged tender wounds and swollen spots on Liam's face but close, closer than either man thought he could ever be to another. Liam closed his eyes and clung to Deseem as Deseem clung to him.

"That sounds like a wonderful idea, we'll figure it out...together."

The End

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