

A Springtime Duel
by S.A. Payne

Once upon a time, Tarin Morris was a prized, pretty thing. As a slave in the harems of some of the wealthiest and cruelest men it was only his looks and willingness to obey that mattered. Now as a free man, Tarin lives by selling his skills with a sword to the same wealthy men that once owned him. He fights their petty duels of honor when they'd not risk their lives or sully their hands.

Only as an early spring duel goes awry, his life starts to unravel and his life will never again be the same as it once was...

A Springtime Duel

Chapter One

The coach hit yet another bump and the badly worn springs tossed Lord Glendale roughly. He wasn't a young man, not any longer, and his looming birthday was as painful a reminder of his age as the aching in his bones. It wasn't his habit or nature to go venturing into the filthy, poor lower districts of the city, and not for the first time he was tempted to change his mind and return home.

It seemed as if every turn, every aspect of Glendale's life, conspired to brutally remind him of how ordinary he was in the eyes of society. His wife, lovely but distant, saw to it he never forgot. It was little wonder he was disgustingly grateful to hear that the Governor's cousin, Lord Harnswell, had accepted the invitation to attend Glendale's birthday dinner party. Just knowing that Harnswell was going to be at his own private celebration flushed him with pride.

Lady Glendale had been totally proper in her suggestion that the party, originally intended to be a small and intimate affair, must be worthy of such a grand figure in society. The guest list had mushroomed from a dozen to over a hundred; the courses at dinner had gone from five personal favorites to a full dinner of thirteen. There was going to be music and dancing and a society ball after dinner. His simple birthday party had become a highlight of the social season virtually overnight and people who scorned him were now begging for invitations.

Which had opened up a whole new arena of concern, one Lord Glendale didn't trouble his lovely younger wife with. He had lived his years carefully and had few admirers, but equally few enemies, and now he was turning forty five. If he lived to see his birthing day he'd be too old to challenge. With such a larger scale party it would be easy for a hired swordsman to slip in and deliver a challenge in revenge for some past and mostly forgotten slight. He'd made it so far without a challenge and he wasn't going to risk one the day before safety.

Which was why he found himself in a plain, hired coach, rolling along the old streets of the lower city: he needed to find a swordsman. He needed to be protected, he needed someone to accept a challenge for him should one be offered, and with Harnswell in attendance it couldn't be just anyone.

Discussion of the professional swordsman was a matter of hot gossip in the fine parlors of the upper city. Every season brought a new crop of young men, all trying to earn a fortune and a

name for themselves with their blades. Most never drew even the most minor of interest, but some were lucky or skillful enough to be great. It was this small handful that were the darlings of the nobles. The debates over which swordsman was best could often grow so heated as to lead to challenges and bloodshed of their own.

Those who knew little about swordsmanship would name someone flashy like Carvik Gar. He was really a second rung sword, but his showmanship and skill at drawing an audience into his fight made him a much spoken of name. Glendale felt Gar was uppity beyond his place and didn't approve of his presence.

Most agreed the best swordsman in the city was a man named Benshear Vask, but if asked who was the most deadly even the greatest fan of Vask agreed without question on the name Tarin Morris. Reputation said he lacked Vask's natural skills, and in sheer raw talent Vask was the greater, but there was a wild unpredictability to Morris that placed him at the top.

Vask was a hired sword because, to him, it was art and he was an artist. And like any good artist he liked to have his work admired, for admired he was. He was a delight to the upper city. He attended an occasional party or showing of a play--and attended more than an occasional bed. After a job was completed he stayed around to be congratulated on his handiwork and sip a brandy. The upper city ate it whole, his low city accent, the dangerous air to him, and for all that they embraced the plain and slowly aging swordsman, they also mocked him as a savage and he never saw it.

In contrast, Morris did it for the money. Parlor room whispers said he was suicidal. His skill was strong but everyone knew it was the work the swordsman put into a job that made him great. He planned out details, prepared for all options, and once he accepted a job he was unwavering, relentless and almost unstoppable.

He refused the invitations he received to attend parties socially and shunned the company of the upper city. Unlike Vask, he stood in cold indifference to his betters and sought neither their acceptance nor their approval. He neither cared nor desired to have his work appreciated. People said Morris was as cold as the coin he was paid with.

The ironic thing was his indifference had the entire of the upper city craving his attention. He was many times more handsome than Vask and spoke with an upper city accent for he had been raised there as a slave, which only added fuel to society's desire for his attention. They whispered about when he wore a collar as a child, and it spurred their need to see what had become of the handsome boy. The more the upper city sought to court the young swordsman, the more he looked upon them all with disdain.

Glendale knew he had to hire someone, his life was worth protecting after all, but the question was just who to hire. Gar revolted him, Vask would steal the attention away and there was no way Glendale was going to be ignored at his own party. It left only Morris of the truly great men to hire. Even if a second-rung swordsman would have been socially acceptable, Glendale wanted to impress Harnswell.

The choice had been simple, once he'd sat and thought about it. He simply must hire Tarin Morris and he'd called his manservant in and told him just that. Only, the man wouldn't go and do the task he'd been ordered. The servant had carefully reminded Glendale that Morris refused to work for anyone without meeting them directly. If Glendale wanted to hire Morris, he'd have to go down into the dangerous and dirty lower city himself.

It was such an inconceivable notion, so utterly unthinkable that Glendale refused. It didn't matter if the Governor's cousin would be in attendance, Glendale wasn't going to bow to any upstart swordsman's arrogance. He wouldn't stand for it. He told himself he would do without a swordsman before he went to Morris, told himself all manner of things in his outrage. When his anger cooled with only a few days until the party, there really was no choice.

So he'd dressed himself in common clothes, poor in style, but the fabric was fine and expensive and gave him away on first sight to anyone truly without coin. He'd pulled on his most worn boots, a pair so old and scuffed they weren't fit for civilized society. They'd been tossed aside and he'd forgotten to throw them out and he was glad for it now. It never occurred to Glendale that even the most worn boots were a luxury and most of those who lived and died in the lower city made do with rough sandals. Finally, about his waist he strapped his sword, unwilling to go unarmed into such a wild part of the city.

It was a fine blade, well crafted and expensive. The leather of the belt and sheath were of good quality, but not the gaudy, over-tooled fashion most chose. His father had always said a good sword couldn't be judged by the leather around it, and Glendale had remembered those words. The hilt of the sword, however, was well decorated and the blade was heavy and lovely. Above all, it looked good when he wore it and flattered his ever-expanding waist line. The fact that the sword was as useless as it was pretty didn't matter, Glendale had never drawn it in threat. He had the proper training in the use of a sword as any young man of substance received, but he had no idea of how to fight. That's what swordsmen were for-- a true gentleman found the idea of combat distasteful.

So he was feeling rather clever, certain he blended into the people who he drove past on the streets around him. What he didn't realize was that the very fact that he was in a hired coach set him vastly apart, for the coach's passengers were almost universally upper city folk poking about in the wilds of the lower city, seeking adventures. The coach rolled along the old street, staying to well lit ways, and Glendale sat lightly. He'd been warned that in spite of the clean appearance that one could catch fleas from the straw stuffed padding of the seats. He touched as little as he had to, as certain the poverty of the districts he road by could infect him as surely as any unseen, biting insects.

The drive felt endless and Glendale felt one more jarring bump would be enough to drive him mad when the coach turned into a street of taverns and inns. The street widened and the buildings spread out from the cramped quarters of the street they'd just turned off of onto one that had small yards and respectful distances between each stone work building. The one the coach pulled to a stop in front of was set at the end of the row and the front of the yard was lined with a crumbling, knee high wall.

The tavern stood close to three stories tall and was speckled in real glass windows. The roof was finished in fired clay tiles and the walls were freshly whitewashed. The yard in front was only a dozen or so paces wide, with a tall old tree to the one side offering shade and lanterns hung on posts to light up the stone walkway that led to the door.

Shadows moved inside the glowing lower floor windows, and every time the door was pulled open light and sound poured from inside. Lord Glendale sat and watched the tavern, suddenly uncertain about venturing from the assumed safety of the coach. The people he could see moving around all were armed in one manner or another and moved with a drunken slurred motion that warned of danger and short tempers. It would be just as easy to turn around and go home. No one knew where he was tonight, so no one would know he'd backed down.

He quickly reined in his own uncertainty and reminded himself of just who he was and what his place in the world was. Lord Glendale was from a long and well respected family line and the previous Lord Glendales had never once backed down from any challenge. Neither had he, and he wasn't going to start tonight. With a steadied nerve, he opened the door--any respectable driver would have done it for him--and hopped out from the shabby interior.

"You're certain he can be found here?" he asked of the man sitting behind the horses.

"Aye, Lordship. He's always about this time of night." The driver's grammar was acceptable, but the accent of the lower city was unmistakable. The flat vowels, the sharp cadence to the speech,

it was rapid and ungraceful.

"Wait for me," Glendale commanded and turned to follow the short path to the entrance.

"No, your Lordship."

"What did you say?"

"I said no, I'll not be waiting. You hired for a trip to the inn, not to have me sit and wait at your call. Another coach will be about soon enough." He nodded knowingly toward the darkness of the night.

Glendale pushed down his anger. He had no intentions of being stranded in the heart of the rat's maze of the lower city after dark. "How much?" he asked thinly.

When the price had been met Glendale, finally turned his attention back to the task at hand. The music that had been drifting out had ended, and now only the low buzz of conversation hummed out into the night. He squared his shoulders and drew closer to the doors and was forced to pause before going in to make room for a trio of men to exit.

They leaned on each other and smelled strongly of sour wine, staggered about in contented friendship and didn't look twice at Glendale standing slightly in the shadows. He stepped behind them to catch the door before it shut and his eye fell upon the painted sign over the door. A large, fleecy sheep stood with long, painted eyelashes and a wide grin; behind it knelt the figure of a man, dressed in wealthy clothes, a look of rapturous ecstasy on his face. The sign was well known; its mocking obscenity to the upper classes was whispered over in drawing rooms and parlors. There was no doubt now, the driver had brought him to the right place.

He expected to be noticed when he walked inside. Glendale was used to being noticed but few eyes swung to look at him. The crowd inside almost made a point to not glance toward the door as it swung open and shut. The tavern was as full as it had appeared. A small stage set in the back was well lit but empty; musicians lounged around the side, talking and sipping from mugs. Along another wall stretched a counter with an open slot to the kitchen. Several people, men and women, sat there and ate plates of food and sipped drinks from wooden mugs. Groups of people sat about the tables drinking, eating and some gaming. A large cluster was carefully watching a dice game and calling out enthusiastically at each toss.

There appeared to be four sorts of people in the inn. The first were the inn's workers, men and women alike that moved with long practiced ease around tables and crowds, carrying drinks and food and scooping up coin. Glendale spotted at least a half dozen people he pegged to be whores, mostly women but he saw at least one male, each carefully dressed and being charming to anyone who drew their notice. Once he saw a young woman with black hair and wide hips lead a man to the stairs; they disappeared up to the hallway above. He counted at least a dozen or more who had to be from the upper city. They were dressed in obvious efforts to blend in but their accents gave them away. They stuck together, drank and gamed and for the most part were young men seeking thrills and wild adventure.

The last sort were the reason he'd come to this tavern. By far the largest number present were swordsmen, dressed from plain to flamboyant and all armed. They were men and women, armed and strong. They drank and joked, living loudly on the coin they earned from renting out their skills. While this wasn't the only tavern to cater to their lifestyle, it was one of a very small number of them.

Here a sword could be hired, a duel arranged or even an assassination if you had enough coin. It was where letters were sent when jobs were offered or where face to face meetings were made if a hire was planned. Inside was only for swordsmen; thieves were driven off to their own places, informants were not tolerated and being a slaver would get a body killed.

From the dozens of swordsmen, Glendale searched for one. He stood inside the doorway and scanned the room, searching for the man he'd only seen occasionally and then from a distance.

"Can I help you?" A deep voice spoke from Glendale's right.

The lord turned and had to crane his neck up to see who had spoken. The man was tall and broadly built, his head was shaved bald as an egg and his dark brown eyes were steady. "Tarin Morris," Glendale answered simply, knowing a little bit about the protocol of hiring a swordsman from the man he normally sent to accomplish the task.

The big man nodded knowingly. "Black haired fellow, over with the musicians." He motioned with his chin while flagging down a girl that went past.

Glendale peered at the area by the stage and saw a black headed man. His hair in a neat tail at the base of his skull; he stood with his back to them listening to one of the musicians talk.

"Jen, see to it his lordship is placed in a private room and let Tarin know he's company?" the deep voice rumbled out.

Glendale turned his attention from the man by the stage to the short and slightly round woman who'd been addressed as Jen; she was dressed in the plain clothes of the servers. "Sure thing, this way." She spoke quickly with a slight bobbled curtsy before turning to move swiftly away.

Glendale followed her along the edge of the main room to a door discreetly placed in the back. She moved through it with confidence and he followed her into a well lit hallway which was lined in more doors. She opened one seemingly at random and motioned for him to enter.

"It'll be a moment only, sir, can I get you anything?" she asked distractedly, unimpressed with him.

"Nothing," Glendale answered a tad too sharply and paced inside the private room.

"Yes, sir," she answered with another bobbled curtsy and shut the door behind him.

The room was large enough to seat several comfortably, the cushioned chairs and smooth wood table finer than what sat outside. There were no windows, no other doors and few decorations. A small charcoal burning stove sat by itself to ward off the damp but otherwise the room was empty. Glendale took a seat and waited.

The wait was quite a bit longer than he had expected and he was about to rise and see what the delay was when the door opened. He was caught half rising to his feet and was forced to continue the motion, forced to offer the swordsman the sign of respect he otherwise wouldn't have.

"Tarin Morris?"

The swordsmen turned from latching the door and paused, his eyes narrowed a moment but he nodded. "Aye."

Glendale was forced to pause; naturally he'd heard the stories, but he hadn't truly believed them. The man standing across from him looked more like a fantasy idea of a harem slave dressed up as a swordsman than one in truth. He was neither unusually tall nor short but he was lean, slender and with a graceful body. His shoulders were strong and his torso tapered to lean hips, but a strong and well balanced body wasn't overly uncommon. It was the swordsman's face that was stunning. His hair was black, thick and glossy and even though it was pulled back it still looked vaguely untamed and wild. His skin was the color of milk, the color women and aristocrat men would die for, with just enough rose tones to keep him from being corpse pale. His lips were

expressive but neither too full or too thin and balanced his straight nose well. His cheekbones were high and countered the proud point of his chin but all of this was secondary to his eyes.

His eyes were large and edged in thick, long, curled lashes. It was their color that was so highly spoken of and a color Glendale had dismissed until he found them locked with his own. For instead of brown or hazel which should have accompanied someone with such black hair, the swordsman's eyes were lavender. Not blue, not slightly off- blue but a true, nearly violet, lavender, clear and bright. The combination of the handsome, lean body, the well balanced, handsome face and the extraordinary color mix of pale, fair skin, black hair and lavender eyes left Glendale momentarily stunned.

"I'm far too busy to be bothered merely to be stared at." The swordsman spoke in mocking tones, using the upper city accent to his advantage.

"By Jeses, why were you ever uncollared?" Glendale whispered.

Comments like that used to drive Tarin into almost blind rage, but he'd grown accustomed to them and now they just annoyed him. "I allow clients to make one mistake, that was yours. Now, do you have business with me or have you wasted my time?"

The swordsman's tone snapped the shock off Glendale. "You speak very lightly to me, sir."

Tarin shook his head and was too tired to be amused at Glendale's blind arrogance. "You seek my favor, not the other way around. Which is it?"

"I have a job for you," Glendale answered and still couldn't help staring.

"Then by all means, sit and we'll discuss it." Tarin waved to the table and took a chair of his own.

Glendale found himself doing as was suggested and with only a raised eyebrow from the swordsman found himself explaining. "You see, I've a party coming up, in my house, to celebrate my birthday. I need an honor guard for the night. The cousin of the Governor will be expected to attend so it can't be just anyone."

"I don't guard people I don't meet."

Glendale shook his head. "Oh no, not for him, he'll be traveling with his own guard I'm sure. You see, I've very little need for protection most times. I don't retain a guard. This party is the day before my actual birthday. I'll be forty five. I've made it to this age without a challenge, I won't die the day before my birthday. If someone wishes to challenge me, this will be the last chance they have before I become too old." The law had clear rules on challenges of honor: neither party could be younger than twenty, nor a day older than forty five. After Glendale's birthday, he could rest assured that his odds of dieing of natural causes would greatly increase.

Tarin shrugged. "So postpone the party a day or two."

"I can't, the Governor's cousin is only free the day before. To pass up the chance to have the honor of his presence at my private birthday party would be unthinkable. I must have an honor guard." He leaned forward, fascinated in spite of himself with the entire process. The few times he'd hired a swordsman he'd paid it as little thought as possible.

"What are you offering?"

"Ten crowns to attend, an additional ten if a challenge is offered to my honor, twenty if it's to my death."

Tarin did laugh now. "Thirty crowns? That's not even worth my time."

"I can go to Vask, it's a fair amount, I don't expect there to be any trouble. Ten crowns to stand around and keep a watch is generous," he replied quickly with almost a childish pout to his voice.

"That isn't what I hear. Wintermarch has made his dislike of you very public. You can take your thirty crowns to Vask." Tarin leaned back in his chair knowing full well Vask was already working a different job. They'd only crossed swords once in the last few years and neither had been able to best the other. From then on they made it a polite habit to stay informed of each other's doings and stay out of each other's way.

"Wintermarch wouldn't dare. Thirty crowns no more. I've brought the first payment with me and I'd like to establish the details tonight and avoid another trip to discuss them." He was caught; Wintermarch was the single reason he was seeking an honor guard.

Tarin shook his head and wondered if the man was so self absorbed that he neither noticed or cared that he'd never introduced himself and yet Tarin knew who he was and who wished him dead. "I'm going to pass on the job."

The swordsman spoke in such a smooth proper accent with all the tones and inflection of one of class that the refusal was as sharp as a slap. "What do you mean pass?"

"I mean I don't accept. I suggest you see Vask. He's famous enough for any relation of the Governor." Tarin's tone was cold. "Good night." He rose smoothly and left the room without looking back. He ignored Glendale's comments on his manners, heritage and past and simply shut the door.

Out in the main room the large, bald man was discreetly watching and Tarin nodded to him and made his way over to the far corner of the counter. "I'll be going out for a bit, Owen, see to it Lord Glendale leaves without speaking to anyone else. Send him over to Vask at the Bean Bowl Inn, okay?"

Owen nodded and set the rag he'd been using to wipe the counter on an empty stool. "Will do. I take it didn't work out?"

"His lordship doesn't appreciate the value of my skin as much as I do," and he grinned to take the bitterness of truth out of the words.

The laugh that Owen made was deep and nearly silent. "I get you, Tarin, I get you. Will you be back in later tonight?" Owen owned the tavern and he tried to treat all his customers fairly but some were friends. Unexpectedly, Tarin had become one. His upper accent and far too dry wit alienated most people but Owen had liked him from the start.

"Naw, I think I'm gong to go and try to sleep." Tarin nodded his head where another man would have clasped the larger innkeeper on the arm. "Thanks for your help."

"Anytime." Owen nodded back at him. In the years that Tarin had been coming to his inn he'd noticed that the slender man touched no one if he could avoid it. Those who weren't his friends said that the young swordsman was arrogant and thought himself better than the others. Owen knew better, he had been a slave himself once.

Tarin slipped out into the cool of the night and wished he'd thought to bring his cloak with him when he'd left that afternoon. The nights in the lower city, far too often, were damp or foggy. They were stuck between the river and the bay and that created some interesting weather. He made his way out to the street and started to turn to the sidewalk.

"Hey, Morris!"

Tarin's hand went to the hilt of his sword as he turned to trace the voice not to an attacker but to a coach driver. "Evening, Lits, how's it going tonight?"

The man scratched at a stubbly chin. "Mostly young hotheads, like normal. Catch!" He flipped a coin from where he stood by the door of the coach.

It wasn't difficult for Tarin to reach out and snag the coin from the air. "What's this?"

"A bishop for you, is only fair to cut you in on it a little. That upper man, he paid well." Lits' grinned widely.

"How much did you milk him for?" Tarin knew better than to refuse the small kick back. It was how things were done in the lower city.

Lits looked around to make sure they weren't being overheard. "Almost a full crown! I could have gotten more but I'm more honest than some. You're good for my business, Morris, making these rich folks come down here themselves. None of them know what to pay."

"That's the sole reason I do it, Lits, just to help you drivers out." His tone was so dry, so sarcastic in his out of place upper accent that it made Lits laugh. "I'll be seeing you later tonight."

"As promised," Lits whispered softly and leaned back against his coach.

In spite of what Tarin had told Owen, he didn't head toward home and sleep. Sleep was far too often an elusive companion in his life and he'd found over the years that a walk in the quiet stillness of the damp night settled his thoughts enough to allow some rest. The sight of him crossing lit and unlit streets and alleys was common enough that few took notice. Gangs and thugs had quickly learned that he kept his blade and his attention sharp and few dared to cross his path with anything close to a threatening move so there was little to fear in the dangerous dark. Tonight was different, tonight he had to think and he had another meeting planned. Things had just gotten a touch more complicated.

Next Chapter

Story Home

Home

A Springtime Duel

Chapter Two

It wasn't long before the rain that had been threatening began as a light drizzle. It was the sort of damp that soaked slowly into cloak and clothes, skin and bone. There was a distant smell of the sea on the air and the memories the scent called up distracted Tarin from his more pressing worries. The few people his steady pace took him past kept to themselves and out of his way; none spoke to him.

So it was even more startling to hear his name in hushed whispers from a small group of young men, little older than boys, clumped together at the mouth of an alley. That wasn't uncommon, many were awed at his reputation and those that hadn't crossed paths with him before stared as if he was a member of the distant wealthy society across the river. What surprised him were the snatches of their conversation he overheard as he hurried by. It had been a long time since anyone had dared mention his past with him in earshot. Any other night the words alone would have been enough to draw his angry attention but tonight, weighed down with more important concerns, it took the layer of their snickering to turn his steps back around to them.

It didn't surprise him to see two of the boys had faded to the back; Tarin knew their faces which meant they knew him as well. The pair were ready, not for an attack, but to make a smooth and easy run for it should trouble arrive. Tarin dismissed them and focused on the three that remained. Two looking nervously toward the third, the leader, and the one who'd spoken and started the laughing.

Tarin half expected them to be young and was surprised to see the leader was at least close to his own age, the others similarly. All of them should have been well old enough to know better, if not about Tarin personally then about any armed, lone man out in the darkness of the lower city. None of that sort were to be trifled with lightly, even if they weren't swordsmen.

The pair to the sides of the leader looked about nervously, having the sense to taste the tension of the moment and the danger of the swordsman's notice. The leader stood firm as Tarin turned and strode on long legs back to the small grouping. The plain clothes, cheap, ill-fitted boots and heavy cudgel tucked in the boy's belt spoke clearly of his general thug life. The clothes were cast offs, the boots most likely stolen from a past victim's feet and the cudgel his tool of trade.

Without worry or fear from their greater numbers, Tarin stopped across from the leader and pinned him down with his eyes. "If you've something to say, I'd like to hear it." He made his accent as mocking as he could and used it to great skill to discern his superiority.

The pair in the shadows faded further away, the pair that had held their ground squirmed but the leader in his arrogant confidence stood firm. He pressed his lips together into a thin line and his eyes narrowed but he was careful to keep his hands well away from his cudgel. "I was telling my mates here just how many beds you used to warm up on the hill. Telling them what a prissy whore you are and how without that sword you'd be less than a dock slut on her knees in an alley." The words came out quickly, pushing to deliver the full insult.

No one breathed; all the boys' eyes were tightly watching for the swordsman to reach for his blade. In that moment, that second of action before the blade could be made naked and deadly, all swordsmen were vulnerable and they watched for their moment to rush him. Tarin was breathing steadily and in spite of his anger he was still thinking. He was fast and knew it but equally knew his limitations. When he moved it wasn't toward his blade; he threw his closed fist with the full might of his arm, knowing his aim was true and knowing it would connect.

The young thug's jaw clattered from the blow, his head snapped back and blood began to flow from broken tooth or split flesh. He stumbled under the force of the unexpected attack but held his feet. Tarin watched him stagger and too quickly recover but the counter attack came from the boy to the right. He swung high and Tarin had been watching for it and easily ducked below the boy's arm. When the boy's reach was fully extended Tarin raised back to his full height and stepped toward his attacker, catching his arm with both of his hands. Before the boy could react to being half restrained, Tarin switched his grip and yanked. The arm made a sickening, splintering sound and the boy fell away with howls of pain.

There was a momentary pause and Tarin scanned the area. The first two boys had faded away into the night, the leader was reaching for his cudgel, the one boy leaned against a wall and cradled his obviously broken arm and the third was swinging his fist. Tarin pushed toward the latter boy, catching him off guard and taking the blow on his shoulder rather than his face. He

slipped past and behind the attacker and kicked with his heavy booted foot at the boy's knee. It connected with heavy force and knocked the boy to the ground.

It was more of a sense than a sight that caused Tarin to side step and scurry backwards, the cudgel slamming down past him to land on the fallen boy instead. The boy wailed from the blow but his friend didn't pause; he swung the cudgel back up and pulled it into another lazy arc. Tarin skittered back out of the way again and before the boy could bring it around for a third try he brought his fist back into contact with the boy's face. The leader reeled again, the cudgel shuttering in his grasp and before he could regain the offensive Tarin hit him again, and again, until the boy fell, stunned, to the damp ground.

Now, and only now, did Tarin pull a blade, but not his sword. The knife was ugly but very well crafted and honed to a thin, sharp edge. He kicked the cudgel out of the boy's grasping hand and knelt over the stunned thug, his fingers tangled in the boy's hair.

Again Tarin took the moment to pause and check the surrounding area. No one was in sight but the two remaining boys and neither one looked too eager to push an attack. "I'm willing to believe the insult came only from this filth," Tarin said in gentle tones, the sound of a benevolent lord. "That is, if you disappear, now, and spend your lives making sure I never see you again."

They nearly tripped over themselves to disappear, the one he'd knocked about helping the fellow with the snapped arm. They faded into the night without a look back or a second thought. Both ignored their leader's cries to come back and when they were well down the street, they ignored his cries of pain as well. Within an hour, the lower city's taverns and thugs were buzzing with another story of Tarin and how no one mocked his past.

Before that hour was up, Tarin was walking along a well traveled and well lit street, people were careful to avoid his eye and he knew word of the thug was spreading. There was no point in being discreet about it; the more people talked, the less they bothered him and the happier he was. In the end, it was all for the best.

There was no mistaking the swordsman for anyone else. Lits spotted him a half a block away. Tall and dressed in well made, if simply styled clothes, his thick hair in its neat tail, not wearing a cloak in the damp chill and walking with no fear and no rush - even with out the elegantly simple blade at his waist he was unmistakable. When he caught up to the lone swordsman he slowed the coach down and got as close to the pace of Tarin's stride as he could.

"There you are! I've been looking all over for you, sir!" he called out from his driver's seat with only a touch too much drama. "Someone's asking to see you, I'm supposed to take you to them." He was grinning ear to ear now, enjoying the cloak and dagger game he'd been asked to play.

Tarin stopped his walk and sighed at the poor acting. "Thank you, Lits."

The shades were drawn on the coach. Light seeped from inside and Tarin moved to the door. He scanned the street once for prying eyes before unlatching it to climb inside. As soon as the door shut behind him and a moment before he could sit down, Lits had the horses moving again.

"Hello again, Tarin." The voice was as warm as a touch and the woman it belonged to was as lovely as her smooth voice suggested.

She sat on the bench opposite him, pressed back to avoid being seen and dressed in rich, dark silks. Dark lace covered her hair and settled about her shoulders. The smell of perfume wafted off of her and filled the small coach. There was only one way to describe her: she was loveliness. Her warm brown hair was artfully arranged, her face was carefully painted, but even without the added style she was still lovely.

Tarin inclined his head. "Lady Glendale, I had a very interesting visit from Lord Glendale this

evening.”

She paled very prettily. “Does he know? If he does I can’t go home.”

“No, he doesn’t suspect you but he does Wintermarch.”

“So he tried to hire you as an honor guard? He must be concerned.” She pressed a white, slender hand to her chest, above the neck line of her dress and over her heart. It made for a pretty sight.

“I sent him to Vask.”

She shook her head. “Why? Do you truly wish to die?”

“Vask can’t take me.” Tarin smiled thinly. “Besides, he’s already working a job, he doesn’t have time to take on another on short notice. Now, you promised me a finalization of your offer.”

“I want him dead.” The light airiness of her beauty faded in her half hissed declaration. “If you don’t do it now, I have to live with him until he dies. If he has an honor guard, kill him and then continue the challenge. I want you to continue it until he is dead.”

Tarin hadn’t expected her desire to kill her husband to run so deep. “That will be expensive.”

She waved the comment off. “Money isn’t important. I’ll give you sixty crowns to kill him and one additional guard, an extra twenty crowns for each additional person you must kill.”

It amused him that Lady Glendale was willing to pay twice the price to kill her husband than he was willing to spend to stay alive. “Being so bloodthirsty could be seen as an assassination. Particularly with the Governor’s cousin being present.”

“I’ll take full responsibility, it’s within my rights to press the challenge until he’s forced to accept. I have an additional request.” She looked to her hands and then across to the too handsome swordsman.

“Which is?”

“I want him to suffer. You’re known for killing cleanly and quickly. When you get to my husband I want him to suffer.” Her voice trembled but it wasn’t in uncertainty, it was rage too long deeply buried.

“I can’t promise that, nor am I certain I would deliver such a death if I have a choice.” He answered carefully, wondering what had happened to make her hate her husband so totally.

She nodded. “I thought as much. There is a child, Lord Wintermarch owns her. She’s of little use to him, he bought her on speculation but the coloring didn’t breed true, or so I’m told. He’s been unwilling to sell her in case her children might carry those traits. According to the files she was sired by you.” The icy cold tone had returned.

Tarin shrugged. “What of it?” He managed to sound calm, to look uninterested but inside he was alert and uneasy.

“The sale to Lord Wintermarch was private, no one knows he invested in her. I have influence over his Lordship, I could have her killed or sold into less pleasant situations.” She locked eyes with the man across from her and wondered how he could be as blasé as he appeared, if he was as emotionless as people said.

“I won’t be blackmailed,” he answered softly and it held more threat than if he’d screamed.

She smiled broadly, the ice melting and the charm returning. "I didn't think you could be. Wintermarch has never met you and thought you might be more receptive to the threat. I felt you might be more moved by a bribe. I can arrange to have the child quietly sold to you, for a discount. Say, thirty crowns?"

"I'm not able to purchase a slave, as you well know."

"No, that pesky law about former slaves, but I'm sure there's someone you trust who would sign the papers."

"The child isn't worth thirty crowns. Assuming she's undamaged and has been raised by Lord Wintermarch he has no more than eight or ten crowns invested in her. I don't care what he spent to purchase her on the speculation that she'd inherit certain traits, she hasn't and so has little value." He leaned back as the coach continued to roll down another street.

"Twenty then ."

"Ten."

"Fifteen?" She raised an eyebrow.

"Ten, and I promise Lord Glendale will linger for at least two days."

Her eyes glowed. "Ten and two days, if he lasts three you get the child for eight."

Her coldness chilled him, her hatred echoed in her words. "Done. I require a letter of intent and hire as well as half up front."

The lovely, pretty lady returned and she smiled happily. "Done, and done." She said while handing over a small leather purse fat with coin and a folded paper with a heavy seal at the bottom.

Tarin accepted both and scanned over the letter. He couldn't read but he knew just enough to pick out a vague meaning. It was plenty to prevent him from accepting a shopping list instead of a letter of intent. The coins he didn't count and wouldn't until he was home; he could tell by the feel and weight that it was close to the proper sum. Very few people were willing to cheat a swordsman. It tended to be fatal. "Thank you, we have an arrangement then ?"

"Yes, we do, unless there is something else I could offer you, another way I could show my gratitude?" Her slender hand settled lightly on his knee and she leaned forward to allow a clear view of her cleavage.

He stared at her icily. "Just the coins and the sale of the child, I want nothing more."

She leaned back but her hand remained. He glanced from her face to her hand and raised an eyebrow. She smiled sweetly and slid it from his knee. "I knew you'd refuse but I wished you wouldn't."

"I don't mix work and pleasure. If that will be everything, Lady?" He pounded on the side of the coach and felt Lits slowing down.

She sighed but nodded. "That's all. Until the party?"

Tarin nodded and lifted the latch on the door and hopped out before the coach could fully stop. He nodded to Lits who tipped the hat he'd put on against the night's chill drizzle and drove off without a word. Tarin didn't stand around, for as much as he wanted to just go home and forget

the odd events of the night, his mind was whirling in a dozen new directions. So he forgot about his cloak and his bed and set his feet toward the nearest river crossing and the closest thing he had to someone he trusted.

The foot traffic picked up once he crossed the river and he received more than a few second glances as he made his way across streets in a path he knew well. He ignored the looks, kept his hand close to his sword and his eyes on the shadows. The folks that wandered the upper city shouldn't be trusted.

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Chapter Three

Tarin arrived with no difficulties. The row of houses were just a single street from being on the river and were close enough to the lower city to have a reputation of being untamed and wild while still being safely within the confines of the patrolled and seemingly-secure upper city. With the easy access to the bridges, and the illusion of being so near to the uncultured side of town, it was no wonder that these streets attracted certain artists, eccentrics, those living too close to the lower city poverty and those who lived on the fringes of the upper city life. The upper city slave markets, clean and nothing like the bestial pens in the lower city, operated at one section along the river. Gambling houses and rough taverns trying to recreate the thrill of venturing into the lower city, without the risks, flourished. Lower end theaters without the high priced patrons put on artful but abstract performances and whorehouses peppered neighborhoods.

It was to the latter that Tarin went. The neighborhood was small shops and low end homes with a few taverns and the general assorted mix that clustered near the banks of the river. The house that the Pink Pearl resided in had been grand once, but had been left to decay before the ladies had moved in. It had taken a great deal of work to transform it back to some of its former splendor and now it retained a somewhat antique feel with all the overdone opulence of the wealth of a generation before. The women that worked inside were attractive, educated, highly skilled and the reputation of the Pink Pearl had been growing with each passing year.

Tarin sidestepped a trio of drunken young men that stood in debate about going inside and made his way not to the front door but around the side, past the stable they shared with the neighbor's tavern and down an unlit stone path to the back of the house. The garden stood bathed in moonlight, surrounded by a low wall and a carved gate that squeaked gently in the low breeze. He moved by memory to the kitchen door, which stood half open to let the heat escape. The light from inside pooled out and lit up the shallow stone steps, a warm inviting glimpse on a damp night.

He climbed the steps and pushed the door open. The cook, a slender woman named Judith, stood in her plain dress. She directed two young girls in cleaning the kitchen, working to finish for the night. She caught a glimpse of movement out of the corner of her eye and was startled at the

sight of him.

"Oh, Tarin! I'm going to tie a bell to you, boy, if you don't learn to make some noise when you move around!" She smiled and it stretched the thin scars on her face. She might have been pretty once - her eyes were warm and her hair was thick even now as she pushed into her middle years - but someone had seen to it she wasn't allowed to stay pretty. Her past was as unspoken as his own and they both left it at that.

"Evening, Judith, didn't mean to startle you."

She waved the concern aside. "No harm done. Have you eaten?" Her accent wasn't the rounded-vowel, proper accent of the wealthy class of the upper city, nor fully the flat, fast accent of the lower city. She spoke with the mixed version of both, the rounder vowels slurred together into a fast clip that so many of the working classes of the upper city used.

"Earlier, it's okay, I'm not hungry. How've you been?" He always made the time to have a moment's word with Judith. She was what he imagined a friendly aunt would be.

"Well enough, well enough. Busy night tonight, people coming and going like bees to honey!" She dried off her hands on a dirty apron and leaned against the long counter. "Go on back to the parlor, I'll see word is sent out that you're here. Will you at least take tea?"

"Judith, I'm fine, truly I am. You just get the kitchen shut down for the night so you and your girls can get some sleep." He grinned again and slipped out one of the doors that led from the kitchen. Most of the house was public and open. A few rooms were kept private and the door he used led directly to the back private section and to the parlor.

He'd always been fond of this room. It wasn't as richly accented; the furnishings were older and shabby but well stuffed and homey. The fireplace's mantle was ungilded, uncarved and of a simple design. The lamps were plain and functional. Books lined shelves built into the walls. Hand knitted blankets were folded and readily at hand for use and it felt like a home down to the faint smell of perfume, flowers and dust.

The embers in the fireplace were glowing softly, long untended and he busied himself with the poker and the simple task of feeding the small blaze. It sprang to life easily and soon was cracking happily and throwing off a warmth that chased some of the night's damp from his clothes.

"Stop that, you won't leave anything for Dorienna to do," a slightly nasal female voice fussed from the entrance to the parlor.

Tarin replaced the poker in its slot as he stood and turned to face the woman. She had never been attractive - even in her prime she'd been plain - but now as she'd aged she'd put on a tremendous amount of weight. With the weight, she'd put on an equal amount of grace and dignity that she'd never held at her slender best. Now she was round, soft and the added weight and years had turned her from plain to slightly handsome. She dressed in fine linen and occasional silks in styles that flattered her figure as much as they could. Her dark hair was worn up in a respectable style and she indulged in and wore jewels.

"Hello, Shelee," Tarin said and smiled warmly but made no move toward her.

Shelee Morris owned the Pink Pearl, but there was a lean sharpness about her eyes that suggested a time when she hadn't lived in such luxury. Very few remembered, knew or spoke of the fact that she had started out trading tricks in dirty alleys in the lower city, lower even than the freelance whores that worked in taverns. Even fewer people knew or remembered just how she'd gone from that to the owner of a successful house.

"Tarin, you're soaked through. Is Judith bringing you some tea? Wouldn't do to have you catch a cold." It was almost a physical need to embrace the young swordsman. She worried near-constantly about him and the lifestyle he'd chosen to lead, but part of the reason he came to her wasn't that she tried to look out for him or even to be a surrogate mother but because she respected his boundaries and accepted who he was.

"I'm fine, it's just damp out again. And no, I told Judith to just go to bed. I won't be staying long enough to have tea anyway. How are you? You look well." Shelee was more home to him than the rooms he rented. The sound of her voice alone made his shoulders unknot.

She smiled broadly and moved--with a grace that most women her size lost--to a well worn and plain chair she always claimed as hers. It fit her well and she folded down onto its cushions. "We're all well, plenty of clients and Cris, that nice young musician you sent us, is working out fine. You're right, he plays beautifully and disappears into the wall paper and he's not once made the slightest pass at any of the girls."

"And he won't, if what his father says is true."

Shelee chuckled. "I believe that. It doesn't matter, he plays very well, even if his singing voice isn't the best."

"His father said he's sounding more like a cat being tortured rather than less, even with his voice mostly changed. He says to say 'thank you' to you. Says that Cris is working twice as hard at his practice and not running with those boys any longer, all from being allowed to play a two hour set up here. He says the boy is near bursting with pride at having a real outlet for his music." He sighed. Vask had filled the boy's head full of nonsense about the glory of a swordsman's life and the child, like most teens, had eaten it up. The boy's father had been horrified at the path his son was heading down--their family had been musicians for generations--and turned to Tarin for advice and help.

"What's on your mind, Tarin? I don't think you walked all this way here so late just to check on Cris."

That drew out a half smile and he leaned back against the mantle. "This has to be kept in the strictest of confidence."

She waved a hand airily. "Of course."

"I met with a dead man tonight." And with that the whole story of the night's odd meetings spilled out. He told her of Lord Glendale's attempts to hire him and Lady Glendale's bloodthirstiness, but didn't tell her about the group of thugs. That would only have worried her needlessly.

Shelee listened to it all and nodded throughout but stayed silent until he'd finished. "So, is she sleeping with Lord Wintermarch?"

He shrugged and sat down heavily. "Damned if I know or care." With a shake of his head he ran a hand over his hair, making sure it was still tied securely back. "Shelee, I'm not worried about Glendale, the man couldn't find the sharp edge of a blade if you painted it purple for him, but when I originally spoke to Lady Glendale he had no idea of a challenge. Now I've only a few days to figure out who he hires and how to take them down."

"What about Vask?"

He shook his head. "Not an issue, he's still working the Duemond job and won't be free for weeks. I'm not worried about Vask. Some of the others, though, are more than capable of dragging out a fight, and that increases the risk. Then there's the issue of delivering a dirty blow; I've always tried to be as clean as I could, always."

"I know you have," she answered softly, hating that he did this.

"All of this for a child I'm not even certain is mine. Is it worth it?"

"I can't answer that for you, but I'll send a letter over to Lord Wintermarch and find out the child's number. We can run it with the central office and see if she's yours. I'll even send Eve over to the office directly so we won't have to wait and won't leave a paper trail."

"You'd do that for me?"

"Of course." She'd do a lot more than paperwork for him if she could, but she was well aware of how little he believed that.

"If she is mine, she'll be put into a breeding program in the hopes of my coloring breeding true. That isn't her fault."

The emotion in his voice made her heart ache for him. "Neither is it your fault," she answered and some of the low city accent of her birth slipped back into her words in spite of years of speech coaching.

"If she is mine, I can't let that happen, it's not fair. Glendale isn't anything to me, he's just another hire." His voice hardened as he made his choice. "If this works out properly, would you sign for the child?"

"Yes, she'll have a place here, I can raise her up as my own." Shelee had never told him, but she'd been quietly trying to find any of the children he may have fathered. Most of the sales were private and all she'd found were dead ends.

"No. Thank you, but no, I'll make arrangements. She can't stay in the city."

He sat silent for a long moment, his eyes fixed on the slender flames in the fire and his thoughts stuck on a time he'd rather forget. Shelee watched him, wishing there was more she could do and knowing there wasn't. In that silence, the occasional popping of the fire the only sound, he seemed far too young to carry the weight of his past and some of the consuming depression he'd once held flared up and caught hold of him. She prayed that just sitting there, being allowed to share his silence, would offer him some comfort.

He drew in a breath and straightened up, once more shouldering the entirety of his life. "Well, I should be going, I do need to sleep sometimes." He smiled thinly; it was a running joke. The whispers in the lower city were that he never slept, that he wasn't entirely human.

"Good, sleep--and eat something for a change will you? You're too skinny! Should I have Judith put together some food for you?"

"No, honestly, I'm fine." The smile warmed and touched his eyes. "Thank you."

She didn't need to ask for what. He was like a moth flying to a flame, longing for the comfort and advice of a family, a mother, that he'd never had, and was suspicious of being burned by it. Even after all these years, he still reacted with gratitude and surprise at finding some small measure of what he longed for. "You're welcome," Shelee said softly as he made his way to the door. "And, Tarin, I don't suppose I'll see you much if you're working on a job... So, in advance, be careful okay?"

He nodded but she hadn't moved from her seat and couldn't see him. "I'll try," was all he answered, and it held none of the upper city mocking he normally used so well.

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Chapter Four

The drizzle outside had changed into a full-fledged, cold rain and it had driven a lot of the foot traffic off the streets. The damp never worried Tarin any; he never seemed to get colds or fevers and the chill night air generally left him refreshed. It gave him a sense of freedom that the day never delivered.

He followed the street down to the cross road he normally took to the nearest bridge, passing the sounds of life inside buildings and the little havens of day to day life that went on untouched by the wealth of those who lived further up the hill or the daily struggles of those across the river. It was all fascinating to him. Even after years of watching how other people lived it all seemed foreign and bizarre. The narrow slices of life he glimpsed between shutters as he made his way to the bridge were like tiny views of what could have been.

With the day's happenings, the rain and his thoughts off and running he was only paying minimal attention to the world around him. He was close to the bridge now and close to the lower city where he was known. The irony wasn't lost on him that the place he felt the most secure was the most dangerous. The very few who dared to cross or mock him were quickly, coldly and brutally put down, like the thug earlier, and each one ensured he'd be safe for a time more. It was a safety he took for granted, and every step closer to the lower city lulled him into his own mind and thoughts. Every pace turned off the outside world a bit more.

A muscle twinged in his back. He'd twisted it in a duel a few months back and it was still giving him troubles, mostly when he was tired. It was actually a welcome ache; it signaled that he'd worn himself out enough that he'd be able to get a few good hours of sleep. His mind shook off some of the worries of the day and buzzed around the idea of sleeping soundly, hoping that if he did manage to get to sleep his neighbors wouldn't make a racket in the morning and wake him up.

"If they do, I'm just going to have to kill them," he mumbled under his breath and tried to sound menacing. It came off flat even to his ears but the thought of it made him chuckle. The idea of chasing the fat widow and her daughters around with a drawn sword made him forget about the chill seeping into his bones.

The view from his windows over looked the yard of their building and the widow and her daughters worked outside in good weather. They took plain candles and decorated them for parties and special events for the rich on the hill. Some of their work was quite lovely, but they gossiped and chattered the whole time and drew flocks of local women to talk with. The noise sometimes was unbearable but often was forgivable thanks to the first daughter, the oldest, Analiea. She was attractive, curvy where her sisters were flat and often worked over the small pots of hot wax in very little clothing. His window over looked that as well.

Tarin's mind was thinking about Analiea and not the bridge his feet were carrying him over, so he never saw the shadowy form that ran directly into him as he reached the other side. The shape hit with such impact that it forced him to stumble backwards, his hands automatically both checking the spot he hid his money and bracing the person that hit him so they wouldn't fall.

The money was untouched and so was his blade, the only two things on him of any value. It was obvious the person hadn't run into him intentionally--they'd knocked the wind out of themselves in the process.

"Easy, easy now, are you okay?" he asked and cursed himself for not focusing, for allowing the day and his exhaustion to distract him. They could have slid a blade between his ribs as easily as steal his purse.

The shape in his arms didn't answer, but he was pretty sure from the height and feel it was a woman. Wrapped in a thin blanket, her chest was heaving and she was struggling to catch her breath. Her head jerked up and she tossed a look over her shoulder. Tarin froze and listened and heard it too. Off in the distance, less than a block or two away, came the sounds of people. The echoes made it difficult to tell, but it sounded like a small group. Their voices were sharp and serious in tone.

"It's okay, I won't let them hurt you."

She looked up at him and the light from the torch at the end of the bridge fell on her. Tarin felt his own breath catch in his throat and cursed a god he didn't believe in for making his life more complicated. Rather than have the woman be some random soul out on the wrong street too late at night, she was Feral. There was no mistaking it: her hair was coppery red, even in the low light he could see her skin was dusky golden and her eyes came to a pointed slit at the corners. He'd only had very limited contact with the wild people of the woods, the Ferals, and most of that had been while he was a slave.

Unlike most folks, he didn't view them as sub-human. They'd always been kinder to him than his own people, and he'd admired their quiet pride even while collared as a slave. Distantly admiring them as a people was vastly different than helping one of them escape--and there was little doubt she was attempting to escape. The dress she wore was the simple cut of a slave and the loose metal collar was still about her neck. The sounds bouncing down the alleys wasn't the sound of a group looking for fun but of one searching the night.

"Bloody hell." He shook his head and knew he couldn't turn her in. Knew it as surely as he knew anything. Even if being caught helping her meant being hung, in that moment he knew he just couldn't do it. He had enough trouble sleeping at night; he'd never be able to if he helped a run away, any runaway, back to their owner.

With that conclusion he suddenly felt better. It was right to help her and he was a good person to risk his neck to do it. She'd go back to her forest and people and he'd feel smug and proper for helping to get one person out of a collar. He was feeling better by the second, feeling better that was until she brought her knee up with all of her strength and caught him feeling smug between his legs.

"Bloody hell!" he hissed out between clenched teeth and released his hold on the woman reflexively. Tarin stumbled back to lean on the edge of the bridge as she took off at a dead run away from the voices. His eyes watered up and he leaned forward, trying to make sure everything was still where it should be and not kicked into improper places. There was little choice but to stay put against the rail of the bridge and wait for his knees to stop feeling like water. The Feral hadn't waited around; she'd taken off at a dead run again as soon as he'd let go.

When he was fairly sure he wasn't going to die despite how it felt, he straightened up and walked with as steady a pace as he could manage away from the intersection. The last thing he wanted

was to meet the search party or have it known that a run away Feral had gotten the better of him. Owen would never let him live that down.

As he made his stiff legged way toward his rooms and eventual sleep, Tarin silently hoped the woman would make it away. For all the pain she'd inflicted on him, he couldn't bring himself to wish her ill or hope she'd be caught.

By the time he reached the building his rooms were in he was wet, tired and sore. The neighborhood had been, long ago, fairly well-to-do. Before all those that could afford to moved across the river, there had been whole neighborhoods of large homes. Most had been torn down and replaced with cheap, small- roomed apartments, tight like a rat's maze. The landlord could fit ten times the number of people in the same space so down the grand old homes came.

Tarin had been extraordinarily lucky to have found the rooms he lived in. Several of the grand homes stood on the same dead end street. The fountain at the end of the way still bubbled from spouts set in a wall. Evidence of the continued running water to this street, even if the decorative sculpture had long since crumbled, water still flowed and pooled, offering a place for the block to gather and gossip while doing washing. His building was on the far end away from the fountain, a short walk but far enough down to be private and quiet. The courtyards and lawns still existed around the old homes and there were still trees offering shade in the back gardens.

Tarin's house was divided into four units. The lady who owned it, Mrs. Farntell, was now widowed and rarely went out. She lived on the ground floor and spent her days telling fortunes to young girls wanting to know who they would one day marry. There was a frail look to Mrs. Farntell but she was still as sharp in her mind as ever. The second unit downstairs was rented by her niece and her husband. They had two smaller children that were quiet and well-behaved. The father worked in a warehouse on the docks, and Tarin knew virtually nothing about them. They didn't deem the company of swordsmen proper and had never even introduced themselves to him. Which suited him just fine; he left them alone and they let him be.

The upper floor had been divided, but not equally, in two. The half rented by the widow and her three daughters was a small series of rooms. The space was split up into five rooms, none large, but it offered plenty of privacy for the group. They had a private stairway down to the courtyard, worked hard and generally caused little trouble. The widow, Mrs. Grenk, occasionally tried to push one of her younger daughters under his nose, since she had given the eldest, Analiea, up for being a spinster.

Tarin's rooms were, he felt, the prime pick of the building. It was only two rooms but they were perfect. The stairs he used climbed up the back of the building. The Grenk's stairs went down the far side, so he could come and go at all hours and no one saw. The door at the top was heavy and old and opened onto what had once been a balcony or sleeping porch. The windows that lined it went to the floor and opened up to catch a good breeze on a summer day. Directly inside was his single living space, one large, long room.

It had been an unsuitable room for most but perfect for a swordsman. He had shoved a bed into the back corner and left the rest relatively undecorated. He had a chest of drawers, a rack for blades he wasn't using, a few chairs and a small table, and that was it. The rest of the space that ran the length of the building was open, the wood floors unpolished, the high ceiling offering plenty of space to swing a blade. The room was most likely a large formal dining room or study but it made a perfect indoor studio and he took full advantage.

The only closed space in his apartment was the bathing room, a small room in the corner with the necessary facilities and a large, real metal tub which was worth almost more to Tarin than the open space and high ceilings. Mrs. Farntell hadn't been easy renting to a swordsmen, at the time one with no reputation, but he'd smiled and tried to be charming and she'd let him move in as a

trial. He'd paid more than he should have, and still paid more, but he didn't mind. The others kept an eye on his place, there was plenty of hot water, and he was left relatively alone. Mrs. Farntell had been pleased; she'd gotten her rent on time or early and a good measure of celebrity status as his reputation grew.

The only time he wished he'd have picked a ground floor apartment was when he was hurt or tired, and tonight he was both. It was a long climb up the steps on legs that still didn't feel steady but he promised them a soak in the tub and they didn't disappoint him. He fished the cord with the key to his door out from around his neck and let himself in. There was a hook on the inside of the door frame that he hung cord and key on after he'd relocked the door behind him.

"You know, if your mother catches you over here she'll hire Vask to kill you," he said to the shadowy darkness of his rooms.

A woman laughed. "Or kill you!"

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Chapter Five

Analiea unhooded a lantern. She was lounging in his chair and in spite of the chill was still under dressed. She wasn't entirely blonde of hair but the hours sitting in the sun had lightened it and tanned her skin to a warm golden. Her brown eyes were round but showing small lines at the corners. Her nose was a little too long and her mouth a touch too wide. There was no comparing her to a great beauty like Lady Glendale but Analiea Grenk looked a lot more real.

Tarin shook his head and brushed some of the rain off his clothes. "One day you'll sneak in here and I'll be entertaining company."

That made her laugh again and she kicked her legs off the side of his chair and stood up. "Not likely. You're soaked to the skin. I'll get the fire going while you change."

He nodded and loosened his now wet hair as he walked past her.

"What happened to you? You're moving oddly." Analiea had a keen eye and missed little.

"It doesn't matter but suffice it to say, it's all your fault."

"All my fault! That sounds interesting." She set to laying in charcoal and wood. She really did mean to keep her eyes on her task, but restraint had never been one of her strengths and she stole a glance over her shoulder. Tarin had dug out a loose pair of pants and a matching pull over shirt, practice clothes she knew on sight, clothes he could move in and what he generally wore to sleep in or when he stayed in all day. She watched as he stripped off his wet shirt, the light from the lantern barely falling on him and again she was split between admiration and pity.

Burned into his back left shoulder was a small string of numbers and letters, placed there when he was collared as a child. His back had gained other marks over the years: the thin lines from a discipline strap, the scars from blades that had gotten too close. They spoke of his past louder than his words ever did. It made her ache to see it, to know as few others did how little of his arrogance was contempt and how much of it was self protection. And she was forced to admire him as well; he moved with all the balance and grace that only dancers and swordsmen had, his body fit and toned.

She turned back to the fire before he could catch her watching. He had little body shyness around her but was intensely private and she counted herself lucky to be allowed to occasionally visit him at home. There were limits and she was willing to respect them. The fire caught easily and by the time she heard his footsteps, soft and light, behind her on the rough wood floor it was burning cheerfully.

"So, how did I cause you trouble tonight?" She looked up where he stood, the clothes hanging on him in casual elegance and his dark hair loose about his shoulders. He looked even more like a misplaced lord and, in the fire light, too handsome to be real.

Tarin reached out and offered her a hand on instinct; she accepted it and he steadied her as she stood from kneeling by the fire. "Well, if you'd wear more clothing a man wouldn't be thinking of your lovely shoulders while he should be watching what's happening around him."

Analiea smiled broadly, her eyes crinkling up. He tended to speak of himself in third person when the subject grew too private or embarrassing. "Well, maybe if some men wouldn't watch out of their windows they wouldn't see what they don't wish to see," she answered in her best upper city accent and it earned her an echoing smile.

"I totally forgot that I'd promised to show you that parry until I got in the door. I'm in no shape for it tonight, Ana, can it wait?" He didn't hold her hand any longer than he had to and she wandered back to the chair she'd been in when he arrived.

"Of course it can, I had a busy night too. I just wanted to make sure you were okay before I went home." She looked over to where he was fussing with putting the tea kettle over the coals and did her best sly come-hither look. It was the only way she could hide her relief. He wouldn't mention the night's fighting and neither would she but that didn't mean he hadn't gotten hurt. It didn't mean she hadn't been worried. "I wanted to see if you wanted me to go home."

"If your mother ever finds out..." he warned and fussed a bit more with the kettle but stopped before it became too obvious.

"What? That I thieve a bit on the side or that you occasionally let me sleep up here?" She delighted in teasing him; he took everything so seriously.

"Both, but I meant the thieving." He shook the loose tea leaves from the tin and into the ceramic pot sitting waiting on the hearth. For as Spartan and empty as his rooms were, the few things he had about, like the tea pot, were lovely, decorated and expensive.

She waved it off. "I'm not going to paint candles my whole life and then be starving poor when the fashion changes again. Besides, what's a bit of thieving? Teres is whoring on the side and mother has no clue about that. She doesn't hear what she doesn't want to know and it's not like I'm ever going to marry and have a husband to complain that I can pick his pocket. As to the other, well, that's even less of her concern." One thing Analiea had learned from her association with the young swordsman was that his moods were often mercurial and difficult to understand. She'd quickly come to care for him, maybe even to love him, and had learned that meant that she didn't have to understand why he felt as he did, only respect it.

He poured the water into the ceramic pot and the warm fragrance of the fine leaves drifted across the room. Another concession to his tastes, he drank expensive tea. He carried the pot over to the table where the mugs stood waiting and offered her a half smile. "Tell me about your night?" he asked and it was a sincere need.

She nodded. "Well, you know I've been working on scouting out the Bengaris estate?" There was a shadow behind his eyes that came and went like clouds across the sun. She didn't understand it but knew he honestly cared to hear about her night's adventures; he seemed to need to hear about them and she told him. By the time half the pot of tea was drunk and she was up to the point in her story where she had fallen into the Bengaris' rose bushes they both were laughing.

All through the next day, Tarin found his thoughts fixed on the run away Feral woman rather than his own odd situation. He wondered if she spoke their language and at least understood what had happened to her. Had she been captured in battle and brought to their cities? Was she from this region or had they carried her hundreds of miles from her home? Did she have family that worried about her, did they pray for her safety, mourn her as dead?

It was only a matter of time until she was caught and then they would execute her as an example to the others. There were people in the lower city that would turn in their own mothers for the small reward offered. As soon as word spread everyone would be looking. He couldn't help wondering if she was hiding somewhere, hungry and frightened, or if she was even now being dragged back to her owner.

He was still thinking about her as he started his walk over to Owen's Fleecy Sheep Tavern. The sun was setting and the honest folk were well on their way home, the sky faded from bright orange to dark blues and the shades of night and a different sort of folk slowly were taking to the streets. For a change it wasn't raining and Tarin didn't bother with the main, lit roads. To go the safest routes would add almost a half hour to his walk and that wasn't his idea of a good use of his time.

He didn't make it more than half way there when he heard voices down an alley. Shadows danced along the building walls and Tarin knew that alley to be a dead end between two shops. Normally he stayed out of such things, it wasn't his concern and it wasn't good to interfere but his thoughts went to the Feral woman. He couldn't help thinking it was her trapped down there, couldn't help but think of her as afraid or stop himself from connecting with her need to be free.

With a shake of his head and a sigh he went down the alley. There was a huddled form of a person at the end of the way, collapsed on themselves with an arm thrown up protectively over their head and the alley was filled with a half dozen young boys. Fortunately, Tarin knew them on sight and most by name.

"Why, Billy Bonfior, what are you up to?"

Billy was a tall and gawky boy, more scholarly looking than bully but Tarin knew he pulled the wings off of bugs for amusement.

He turned and looked with surprise at the swordsman standing at the entrance to the alley. "Just having a bit of fun, no harm in it."

Tarin watched the other boys spread out a little, stepping back instinctually to give more room to position themselves if things turned into a fight. He lowered his hand to the hilt of his sword and caught their eyes, several of them paled visibly. "You're making a lot of noise. Honest folk are trying to have a quiet dinner."

Billy grinned. "Since when did you care about honest folk?"

"True." Tarin shrugged and returned the grin but his hand stayed on his hilt. "Who's that you've

got there?"

"Nobody, just some old drunk. We're going to set him on fire and see if he's sober enough to put himself out." A gleam came to his eyes at the very thought. The sheer joy of the sadistic act was almost as fulfilling as doing it. For all his twisted delight in hurting others, part of him didn't want to go so far as to light another human on fire but the part of him that needed to see and do it was consuming.

"Not tonight you won't."

"What's he to you? He's just another drunk." The lower city had about as many drunks as rats.

"He's not anything to me; my rooms are down wind and I won't have them smelling of burned sot." He braced his feet and kept an eye on the biggest boy, the one creeping up on his left hand side. "Come on, Billy, there're a ton of stupid hill boys down here tonight, at least that would be more sportsmanlike. Besides, think of what your father would say when he found out." That was a low blow and all the boys knew it. Billy's father was a thug himself but an honorable one. He'd been concerned over his son's tendencies and swore the next time he did something stupid he'd have him shipped off to their country cousin's farm.

Billy licked his lips and looked to his friends. There was a moment that hung heavy and dull in the night air but the half grown boy nodded. "We could use some coin, come on." He tossed his head and the boys that had been subtly trying to flank the lone swordsman backed off and headed for the open street.

Tarin moved as well, not trusting the boy's agreement and turning his back on the still huddled drunk rather than the too wild young men. They were as common as drunks, skulking about alleys and looking for trouble with a wild look to their eyes. Some became swordsmen, some stayed as thugs and a small few went straight, settled down. Generally, they lived wild and died young.

He didn't move, even after they walked off, laughing, beyond the entrance of the alley until he was certain they had truly moved on. "You'd better be going while you can," Tarin told the drunk and glanced down to the shabby man.

He'd been doused in something that smelled more like wine than lamp oil and the back of his poor cloak was soaked with it. The man's hair was growing out and needed trimming but wasn't long and while it was dirty and in need of washing it wasn't matted. The beard on his face was new and was growing in from a few weeks not months around the dirt that had been streaked there. The poor man looked like a thousand others on their way down but not all the way to the bottom and Tarin felt a moment of pity for the fool. With a shake of his head and after seeing that the man was getting to his feet to leave, Tarin started back about his own concerns.

"You're a kind man, Tarin," the drunk answered uneasily.

Tarin stopped at the mouth of the dark alley, standing in the moonlight and peering back to the shambling man. "How do you know my name?" He was certain Billy hadn't spoken it.

The man shuffled out of darkness and the moonlight fell on him. Tarin narrowed his eyes and saw behind the dirt and wear. "Lieutenant?" Tarin asked carefully, staying out of arms reach of the man he thought he knew. Many people knew his name but few were so bold as to address him informally.

"Not any more. Thank you for your help." He gathered what shreds of pride he had left about him and with a glance in either direction headed down the street.

Tarin stood still in uncertain shock and watched the man leave before coming back to himself

and running after him. "Wait, Lieutenant, wait!"

The man didn't stop until Tarin caught his arm. "Don't call me that," he growled with undisguised bitterness.

A thousand questions came to Tarin's mind and none to his mouth; he just stood staring in disbelief at the man in front of him.

"Well?"

It was the same sharp tone he remembered and he answered instinctually. "What are you doing here?"

"Looking for a drink, now, if you're done playing hero for the night?"

"You look like you've had more than your share already. How long have you been living on ale?"

"You're not my keeper, now get out of my way." The older man pushed past the younger and started down the street again.

"Lieutenant!" Tarin caught up again.

"I told you not to call me that! Go away!"

"No, I won't. Look, have you got a place to sleep?" He waited but the other man didn't answer. "Come on with me, we'll get a real meal into you and you can sleep at my place. If I find out Billy and his friends set you on fire I'd have to kill them and his father would be pissed at me."

"I don't want charity."

"It's not charity. Look, I'd like to catch up on old times." He offered up a lopsided smile.

The drunk sighed. "Okay, but only for tonight!" It made him ache to have to accept help.

Tarin grinned widely. "Excellent, we aren't far, come on."

Next Chapter

Story Home

Home

A Springtime Duel

Chapter Six

The man Tarin had known was almost unrecognizable inside the man beside him. He walked with his shoulders slouched and his eyes lowered. There was no choice in the matter of what had to be done and Tarin mentally rearranged his plans to accommodate. There were just some

things best not to walk away from.

When they reached Tarin's building, lights were burning in windows and he was surprised to see Analiea carrying a bucket of scrub water out to the flowerbeds. She glanced his way but didn't show him any noticeable attention--except in that second their eyes met and he nodded to his rooms. There was no doubt that she'd seen and understood. She'd be showing up as soon as she could get away, and he found himself, yet again, counting on her presence for help and trusting her discretion.

"This your place?"

"I just rent out some of the rooms."

The man sniffed and wiped his nose on the back of his hand. "I'd heard you'd done well for yourself."

Tarin shrugged and unlocked the door. "I get by," he mumbled uncomfortably as he moved to light the lamps.

"Nice."

"Thank you. I think some of my clothes will fit you, if you want to get cleaned up?" Tarin was already moving to light the lamps in his bathing room and gather up some of his own clothing. "I think I can talk Analiea into cooking for us. I'm afraid I can't even boil water without burning it."

"She your woman?" He shuffled along behind the younger man, embarrassed and uncomfortable.

"No, just a friend." Tarin managed to answer smoothly but felt the start of a blush around his neck. "There you are, don't worry about the water, use as much as you want."

The drunk nodded and accepted the bundle of clothes, then shuffled off to the smaller bathing room, latching the door behind him. Tarin released a breath he hadn't known he was holding and crumbled into a chair.

That's where Analiea found him; sitting there, leaning forward with his head in his hands rubbing his forehead. She shut the door quietly behind her and stepped softly. "Tarin?"

He glanced up and managed a small smile for her. "I'm surprised you're still about, but grateful."

"Mother stayed up doing chores later than normal; she had just gone to bed when you showed up. What's wrong? Who's that man?" She could hear the water running in the bathing room. "Have you eaten? I can throw something together for us all."

That warmed his smile. She was starting to know him far too well, and it was a good feeling. "If you wouldn't mind? I'm not overly hungry, but I don't know how long it's been since he's eaten."

"Not at all. What's going on Tarin? You're white as a sheet." She moved to fix what little supplies he kept on hand into a semblance of a meal. The only reason he had more than tea in his rooms was because she had brought it up for him and occasionally cooked.

"His name is Elorin Dunn. He was a Second Lieutenant on the Dellore Dream."

"The ship you served on?" She was careful to stay focused on the task of cooking; he spoke so seldomly of his past and with such awkward discomfort that she offered him privacy to speak in, hoping it would make it easier.

He nodded. "Yes. Captain Chrisholm, he was a good man. He didn't care where you were from, only that you were a good sailor. Lieutenant Dunn was a slave too, the highest ranking in the whole of the navy."

"I'd never heard of a slave being sent to the fleet before I met you."

"It doesn't happen often. I was only there for three reasons: I did well in training in areas that showed I'd be able to work in the riggings easily, and Dunn had earned their respect."

"And the third?"

"Chrisholm pitied me. He was a good man. It wouldn't have made a difference if I hadn't proved I could handle it but that wasn't enough, not alone, not for what I was. Anyway, it wasn't easy but at least on the Dream I had a chance. The others treated me well because they respected Chrisholm and Dunn, and I learned a lot about, well, about everything from them."

It was almost physically painful to speak of. That time had been so difficult and so important. His last master had traded him into the Guard in exchange for back taxes and for his son's service as the law required. From that moment on, Tarin had a four year term to serve that, if completed without trouble, would earn his freedom. Most slaves traded in such a way died in service or disobeyed and became the permanent property of the Guard. Less than half survived the years and most of those chose to reenlist as Dunn had. When Tarin had taken the option to leave, it had been almost a betrayal to the men who had cared enough to believe in him.

Tarin sighed. "I don't know what Dunn's doing out. He had no interest in ever leaving the Navy, and I think he half thought I was mad for going after my four years."

"And he found you tonight?"

"No, I stumbled across him. I was lucky, I had Shelee when I got out, I had a place to go. Even then, it wasn't easy." He clenched his jaw and studied the floor for a moment. "I couldn't just walk away."

"Rightfully so. I'm glad I was here, if you'd tried to cook for him you'd most likely have burned the place down again."

"One little fire, one!" he protested and shook off some of the melancholy that had been nipping at him since he saw Dunn.

"Will you have time now to show me that parry?" She sat back on her heels and watched him. He was in one of his moods. She saw it around his eyes and silently prayed that he wouldn't let it pull him down.

"I should. Would you care to stay and have dinner with us?" It was the closest he could come to saying he wanted, maybe needed, her to stay.

"Of course."

They chatted a little, Tarin too distracted to follow a serious conversation and Analeia silently worried about him. She tossed together some flat cakes and fried vegetables and was scooping them into a fine china bowl when the bathing room door opened.

Tarin's clothes didn't fit him perfectly, they were a little too long in the leg and a bit too short in the arms, but Dunn looked like a new man. He'd scrubbed his hair and combed the knots out. His skin was clean and his face was shaven and some of the proud dignity of the man Tarin had known returned. "I hope you don't mind, I used your razor." He pointed over his shoulder to the darkened room. "I left my dirty clothes in there too."

Tarin waved it off. "You're welcome to the razor, and don't worry about the clothes, I send all my washing out." He stood and placed a hand under Analeia's elbow. "Lieutenant Dunn, this is my friend Analeia Grenk. Ana, Lieutenant Elorin Dunn."

She offered her hand without hesitation and smiled warmly. "Nice to meet you, Lieutenant Dunn."

He accepted her hand and shook it firmly. "It's just Elorin Dunn now, I'm retired."

"Well, Mr. Dunn, if you don't sit down and eat, Tarin never will, and he doesn't eat enough to keep a bird alive as it is." She smiled and graciously served the men at the table, fixing tea and playing the part of a docile woman very well. It made Tarin suspicious of what favor she was planning to ask for in return.

The dirt had washed off, but dark circles lined eyes that were red. Dunn offered a half-hearted grin and nodded in acceptance. "I see little's changed; he hardly ate when aboard ship as well."

Tarin was silent as Analeia dished out the quick meal she'd made. He sat cupping his tea trying to dispel a chill that was purely mental. Dunn ate gratefully and without hesitation, but Tarin picked at the food and moved it about his plate more than he ate. Finally, when he wasn't sure he could stand it any longer, he spoke.

"Sir? What happened?"

Dunn looked up and there was bitterness in his eyes. "Chrisholm's dead."

The words were like a knife and they cut Tarin deeper than he'd expected. "How?"

"Pirates, up north again along the Vernshoch. He didn't suffer, it was a clean wound. It happened over a year ago. They replaced him with a Captain Connick, have you heard of him?" Dunn's food sat forgotten in front of him, his focus only strong enough to hold onto one thing at a time.

Tarin shook his head. "I can't say that I have."

"It was his surgeon that left you for dead right before your time was up. I don't suppose you'd remember that, you were pretty sick. Anyway, he has the same feelings as his surgeon: once in a collar, always in a collar. The Dream became a different ship. A lot of the old crew you knew transferred off or left altogether. My time came up a month or more ago. I've been hearing about how well you've been doing and figured to try my hand on my own." His eyes flicked to the silent woman, who sat watching. Dunn knew enough about people to read how she leaned toward Tarin as protective, and he wondered at their relationship. "Not as a swordsman, that's work for a young man. I thought I could sign on to a river runner, save up and maybe get my own boat in a few years."

"What happened?" Dunn had gone on and on to Tarin during late night watches or idle times in port about how he was going to own his own boat one day.

He shook his head and some of the struggle of the past few weeks showed in his eyes. "Within a day of being ashore I was robbed, what money I had was taken, and it was a good sized sum too. I tried to get work on a boat, but those that might have had a spot for me said I was too old to start out, and those that didn't mind my age suddenly didn't need a hand when they found out I'd worn the collar. I've been getting work on the docks as it's free, but you know how it is; freemen first, and if there's work left over it goes to former slaves. I've been trying, but it's cheaper to buy ale than food." In truth, he'd been drinking more than he'd ever before in his life, and he'd given up hope of ever working the rivers or even on a boat again.

"Jeses sake, you should have looked me up."

"I couldn't, I didn't want you to bother. I didn't want to be a reminder," he glanced down, "or a burden."

"Well, you aren't either," he lied smoothly. "No one can do it alone, and now you don't have to. Sir, why don't you go get some sleep, you have to be exhausted. I promised Analeia something, but we'll stay quiet and shouldn't disturb you too much."

"I can't take your bed. I'll sleep on the floor. You've done too much already."

"Nonsense. I'll be up for hours yet. Go get some sleep. When I want the bed I'll wake you."

"You're certain?"

"Go."

Dunn stood and felt three times his age. "Thank you, Tarin."

"You're welcome, sir." Tarin watched as the older man he had so respected moved to the far side of the long room, into the shadows where the bed was pressed against a wall. The day had been too full of surprises.

"Would you please eat something?" Ana said softly. She was watching him and not the broken man.

He took another bite to satisfy her more than his own hunger. "Ana, that could have been me."

"But it wasn't. Now eat."

"I was luckier, I had independent skills. No one cares if a swordsman was a slave, but try to get work on a boat or as a gardener and all the work goes to freemen first." He lowered his eyes to his plate where he crumbled the last bites of the flat bread up into smaller and smaller crumbs. "You know, I still get offers from houses every few months." She was the only person he'd ever admit that too. Shelee was well known as being his adoptive aunt; she'd gained a touch more to her reputation from his own fame. It wasn't uncommon for another house to approach her with offers for him. It wasn't uncommon that he was approached directly by nobles, all wanting him in their beds and willing to pay. Being a swordsman had only increased the interest, not lessened it.

She bit off a piece of flat bread and shook her head. "I can't imagine the kind of money you'd be making. You'd be fabulously wealthy by now."

"I couldn't do it again, no matter the money offered. And some of the offers I've gotten would cause you to faint."

She giggled. "I don't know, I'm much more materialistic than you are. I didn't grow up in the finest houses on the hill; I grew up snitching bread. I want it all."

It didn't lighten his mood like she had hoped. "I'd have given anything to have been down beside you grabbing for crumbs." He stood up and stretched out his back. "But, what is, is. So, do you want to learn this parry or not?"

"Of course." She was horrid with a sword, but fortunately had little use for one. What she was desperate to learn more of, and had been trying to teach herself for years, was the close up work with a knife. Tarin had been offering advice and occasionally, when feeling generous, teaching her directly. It was a rare chance since he was almost embarrassed by his skill and tried to downplay it as much as he could.

He produced a pair of real blades - there were no practice weapons in his rooms - and they set

about the informal lesson. Ana focused hard as he showed her the move, one that required speed and agility to counter strength, rather than focusing on him. It was an increasingly more difficult problem. The more lessons he showed her, the more time they spent together, the more she was becoming acutely aware of him. She tried to mimic how he moved, his grace, how he stepped without tripping over his own feet like she tended to do, but his very closeness was a distraction.

He seemed to be having as difficult a time staying focused but she doubted it was her presence that had him so distracted. His mind was off somewhere else, even if the lesson was offered smoothly and broken down so she could understand. There was a feel like he was sleepwalking. She knew he wasn't shorting her on the lesson, but his mind was in another place and it was somewhere she couldn't follow.

It was close to the end of the practice runs, their movements now almost at a normal fighting speed and Ana was fairly sure she had the new parry partially learned when her feet tangled. As she stumbled, the blade whipped out dangerously and she knew the moment she began to fall what the outcome would be. Anyone else would have stepped away, let her fall and avoid the sharp, small blade. Tarin stepped forward, coming alert and out of his thoughts, to catch her and letting the edge of her blade drag along his side, cutting the fabric of his shirt and drawing blood.

"Oh, I'm so sorry! Are you okay? How badly are you cut?" She tugged at his shirt, the blade carefully controlled now. "I'm so clumsy!"

"It's okay, it's just a scratch." He pulled away from her hands out of reflex.

There was blood on her fingers. "It's not okay, you're bleeding. Let me take a look, please, it's all my fault. Let me help?"

"I can get it, it's nothing."

"Tarin." She settled her voice down, lowered the tone and pace of her words. "It's not like I haven't seen you without your shirt on before. Let me help."

He paused before nodding. "I have some salve in the bathing room." He hooded a lamp, but enough light leaked out that he glimpsed Dunn on the bed. He'd only pulled a light cover up over himself but he was soundly asleep. The cut was beginning to burn as they shut the bathroom door behind them.

Analeia lit the lamps in the room while Tarin pulled out the basket he kept filled with herbs and salves. The life of a swordsman had made for a myriad of injuries, and he wasn't one to trust others to treat them if at all possible.

"Off with it," she ordered as she dug in the basket and produced a handful of bandages and several small pots that looked promising. She ran water over one of the bandages, and when she turned around he was perched on the edge of his tub with the shirt hanging loosely from one hand. "Oh, I'm so sorry!"

He glanced down at the shallow cut that ran across his side and shrugged. "It's nothing."

"I'll get us some practice blades. It's not nothing, it's got to hurt." She wiped at the smears of blood and then held the damp cloth to the cut. "I'm sorry," she said again.

"It's okay, really." He held still as she washed it clean. The cut was so shallow that it had clotted up and stopped bleeding almost before they could make it to the bathing room. But he didn't protest her need to wash it and rub the sharp-smelling salve into it. It made her feel better for the accident and he made it a habit to tend to all wounds, no matter how minor.

Analeia finished daubing at the cut, the skin around it going red and angry, but her eyes drifted higher and fell on the numbers burned into his shoulder. She'd never been so close to him when he'd been bare chested and her fingers touched the scars carefully.

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Home

A Springtime Duel

Chapter Seven

Tarin's breath caught in his throat and he pulled away a little.

"Did it hurt?" She stroked her fingers over the series of letters and numbers and tried to imagine what it must have been like.

"I don't really remember, I was quite young." The lie came quickly. He remembered it vividly and still sometimes woke up from nightmares.

"You never speak of it. All this time and you never say a word." She didn't remove her fingers but dragged the tips up to the top of his shoulder and left them.

"Ana, you know what I was."

She shook her head and met his eyes unflinchingly. "No, I know how they used you but I know nothing of what you were. Tarin, I..." But she never finished. Before she could speak he had moved toward her, his hands coming up to either side of her neck pulling her into a kiss.

There was little question to his desire. They stumbled backwards until Analeia was pressed to the warm, smooth, wood paneled wall. He followed one kiss with another and his sudden need left her breathless. There was a great deal of whispered talk about just where his preferences ran. The nature of his past compounded with his chosen solitude left a massive amount of room to wonder. Ana had never doubted, not from the moment she'd laid eyes on him. He was distant to the point of being cold but she could feel his gaze in her bones when he looked at her and she knew he was quite attracted to women.

For all the time she'd been able to spend with him, he hadn't once moved their friendship toward anything more intimate. She'd spent the night in his rooms several times but he'd always been the perfect gentleman and it had left her wondering how long they would go before he wanted more.

This wasn't the moment she had expected. Of all the situations she'd tried to establish, of all the times thick with unexpressed desire, this sudden need caught her off guard. She was nearly drunk with desire; she returned his kisses without thought and was dizzy with the feel of his touch.

When he pulled away she thought nothing of it and leaned forward to compensate, to continue to kiss and hold him. He was trembling but she considered that from desire. His breath was short but the feel of it on her neck was delightful. It wasn't until he suddenly pushed her away with enough force to cause her to stumble backwards that she saw something was wrong.

"Tarin?" she asked with uncertainty.

He stood a pace away, his eyes wide and frightened. Ana reached out to him, but when she touched him he flinched back as if she'd hit him. "I'm sorry," he whispered.

"What's wrong?" She made no move to touch him again and found herself half afraid to breathe.

He shook his head. "Please, go."

"Tarin?"

"For mercy's sake, go!" His tone was as sharp as his blade.

Ana nodded and left without another protest.

The door was barely shut behind her when the panic that had been boiling inside of him broke free. He stumbled back until he hit a wall and then slid down it, unable to breathe, unable to think and so frightened he thought he might go mad. He pulled his knees up under his chin and tried to retain control. It was a losing battle and he knew it. In the end Tarin gave in to the panic and fear.

It was a touch on his arm that woke him up. Tarin gasped, startled from the uneasy images of sleep by an unwelcome contact. He tugged away from the touch, bodily scrambling along the smooth wood floor. The wall he scurried into forced him to be still and that moment allowed him a second to settle, chase away the shadowy fears that clung to him like cobwebs and face what was really in the room.

"Easy, lad, easy," Dunn nearly whispered. He held his hands out with their palms open, trying to appear as unthreatening as possible.

Tarin stared blankly for a moment. "Sir?"

"That's right, lad, I've made a pot of tea, thought you might like some."

It took a moment but Tarin nodded. "Thank you," he answered reflexively.

Dunn nodded and left. He'd awoken in a strange bed with a headache and it had taken a minute for the night before to return. That had been one of his lowest moments in a never ending sea of bad moments from the past few weeks. Tarin's arrival made things both better and worse but he wasn't so stubborn as to refuse help when he needed it.

So to wake up in the high-ceilinged, long, open room that Tarin lived in, clean and dressed in another man's clothes but with no sign of that man was a bit odd. He'd assumed Tarin was simply out, going about his life, until he'd gone in to use the bathing room. There, along the wall, he'd found him.

The young man was curled up on the floor, his knees drawn up to his chest, asleep. A fresh, shallow cut was on his side, his shirt discarded near a basket of salves and bandages. There was

something tragic about how the boy was sleeping that spoke more than any words could and Dunn had carefully backed out of the room. Despite his present situation, Dunn was a very capable man and not so deep into drink as to be lost. Not yet anyway. He knew the boy that had served under him and he had heard stories of the man he'd become to put enough of the pieces together to know that something more had happened after he'd fallen asleep. Dunn put himself in the younger man's shoes and had a good idea how unsettling it must have been to be so vividly reminded of his past.

So he did the only thing he could do. It was a small measure to pay back some of the kindness Tarin had already offered him. He'd set about making a pot of tea. It wasn't much but it was all there was to do.

Tarin joined him by the expansive fireplace where he had set his single table. He'd pulled on the shirt he'd been wearing the day before and washed his face but his eyes were still bloodshot and he moved with an exhaustion that sleep wouldn't cure. Dunn pressed a mug of tea into his hands and waited until Tarin accepted before pouring his own.

"You should have kicked me out of the bed," Dunn said at last, unable to stand the tense silence about the other man.

"It wasn't you. How late is it anyway?"

"Late, well after dawn."

"Early for me, I usually sleep until afternoon."

Dunn studied the too-handsome man across from him and found he'd grown more reserved, more withdrawn over the years, not less, and wasn't sure it was a good change. "I hate to ask, but may I stay here today? I'd like to wash out my clothes before I leave."

That snapped Tarin's mind awake. "Actually, I was going to ask you to stay for at least a few more days, maybe longer. I need some help with something of a sensitive nature. As to your clothes, burn them, we'll get you more."

"I can't accept that." Dunn shook his head and his pride stung him.

"Of course you can. I make an obscene amount of money. I raise my rates, they just want to hire me more and as you can see my expenses are small." He cocked his head to the side and his eyes narrowed. "Consider it a loan or payment for helping me out."

They drank their tea in silence, the sun shining in and warming the room. "Do you really need help or are you just being kind?" Dunn asked at last.

That made Tarin grin. "When have I ever been kind for kindness sake?"

"That answers a question with a question. If you are the man I knew, you've always been decent, even if it's annoyed you to be thought of that way."

"Yes, sir."

"So which is it?"

"A little bit of kindness but mostly I need someone I can trust. I can't write out what I want done and if the situation doesn't arise, I need to have confided in someone that won't gossip about it. I know you to be honorable, I know that you'll understand." Tarin could feel Dunn's eyes on him, studying him as they had studied him when he was new on ship.

Finally, Dunn nodded. "Tell me what you need."

Tarin explained the last few days to his former commanding officer, leaving out the thug he'd killed and the Feral he'd tried to help. Tarin spoke carefully, uncertain of Dunn's final reaction, knowing how strict he had been to rules and order. Dunn listened to it all without comment, listened as he had for decades to reports from junior officers and processed the information quickly.

"Who else knows about this?"

Tarin shook his head. "Only you, Lady Glendale and my Aunt, no one else."

"What do you want of me?"

"Lord Glendale will die two days from now, one way or another. A contract made is one fulfilled. Even if I die, the terms of that contract will be completed. If I'm hurt, or killed, I need you to help Shelee get my daughter. She's already promised to sign for her. I need you to get her away from here. There are many excellent girl's schools down the coast. Take my money, see she's safe. There are people that won't care that she's been freed if they know I fathered her. If someone doesn't get her away, she won't be safe." He tried to make Dunn understand how important this was but his voice sounded hollow.

Tarin's voice may have been empty but his eyes burned with such need that it frightened Dunn. "You have my word, I'll see to it she gets away safely. I know the sort of school you're thinking of. I'll see to it she gets there."

Tarin closed his eyes and drew in a breath. "Thank you." He suddenly felt better. Shelee knew the risk the girl faced if she stayed collared but he wasn't sure if she would believe the girl was still in danger once freed. Tarin knew better; he knew the near insane ends some breeders would go to.

"You're welcome."

"I've got a bad feeling about this job, sir."

"It's not a good thing they've asked of you. I can't say I approve but I understand."

Tarin shook his head. "It isn't that, it's more. I don't care about me but get her out."

Dunn felt a cold shiver but nodded. "I will, I'll see to it but I don't think it'll be necessary, you'll attend to it yourself."

Tarin didn't answer.

After Tarin had bathed and felt somewhat ready to face the day he left his apartment to run some errands. There was too much to do in too short of a time and he felt a sudden urge to get it done without delay. Dunn followed him down the stairs, dressed in clothes that didn't quite fit and unarmed, moving like a living shadow of the younger man.

"Good morning, Mr. Morris!" a nasally woman called from the corner of the building as they reached the small courtyard.

Tarin turned and didn't smile. "Good morning Mrs. Grenk." He knew he was going to have to deal with Analeia sooner or later. He had just hoped it was later. Her mother's appearance only served to remind him of last night.

"It's a fine day, isn't it?" She was a homely woman and abrasive and how she'd managed to give birth to such an attractive and intelligent daughter, Tarin had yet to figure out.

"It might be at that."

"Have company, have you?" she asked, coming to nose in on the strange man following the young swordsman.

Tarin knew he had to cut that thinking off before it started as Mrs. Grenk was a huge gossip. "Mrs. Grenk, my uncle, Elorin Dunn. He's in town for a visit."

She offered her hand. "Such a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Dunn. Mr. Morris speaks so little of his family. You must be quite proud of him, everyone knows of him."

Dunn took the offered hand and bowed over it as was expected. It made the woman blush and twitter like a much younger girl. "Tarin values his privacy and we were proud of him before he was known as a great swordsman."

It was a lie and all three of them knew it. Tarin had no more idea of who had been his mother than he did of who had fathered him. There wasn't even record of when he was born, just the general season of fall. Shelee had claimed him as kin and given him a name as soon as he was traded into the guard but she was no more related to him than Dunn. Everyone knew and they all pretended, some out of respect for his past or person, some out of fear of angering him and some pretended openly to mock him quietly. Tarin didn't care so long as they pretended.

"I can imagine, if only one of my girls would marry so well!" Mrs. Grenk not so subtly hinted.

"Speaking of your girls, Mrs. Grenk," Tarin spoke smoothly, coolly, "I was wondering if I might hire the services of one of them. With my uncle in town, I'm going to be too occupied to see to the day to day things. If one of them could find the time to come by, clean up a bit, maybe do some cooking? I'm going to have to hire someone."

"I'm not sure it would be right, a young innocent like my girls are, alone in the rooms of an infamous swordsman, people will talk." She raised her eyebrows and folded her arms across her chest.

"I assure you, Mrs. Grenk, no one will talk about a little cleaning and cooking. Both are boring subjects and all I require of one of your girls. If you are uncertain of their reputations, I can hire someone else." Tarin chilled his voice down and his accent became arrogant with just the right hint of having been offended. She was fishing to find out just what he wanted to know how much to charge.

"No, no need, we're so near, I can keep an eye on my dears being so close. I'll send up Mendi later this afternoon, if that's all right with you?"

"I was thinking more of your Analeia. She's older and I won't have to worry about her trying to handle things she shouldn't. I wouldn't want one of your younger girls getting hurt by accident, what with all the weapons I keep about. Analeia strikes me as sensible enough to be careful. Can you spare her a few hours a day?" Mendi was a sweet tempered girl, the youngest of the three, but if she had two sensible thoughts in her entire life he would have been surprised to learn of it.

Mrs. Grenk paused, wondering if there was more to the request than spoken. "Analeia is a sensible child, sometimes too much for her own good."

"So it's agreed?"

"Of course. I will, after all, be close at hand."

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Chapter Eight

They made their way out onto the street. The mid morning sun made Tarin squint and remember vividly why he normally started his day after noon. All the swirling, very awake people around him were only proving to sour his mood further. After having to deal with Mrs. Grenk and her innuendos he hadn't believed that was possible.

"Where are we going?" Dunn asked when they'd taken another seemingly random turn. The lower city was a jumble of streets and chaos at the best of times. With people walking about, calling to each other and going about their lives it was utter madness in places.

"To get you some supplies. Everything can be found in the market, and I know someone who should have clothes to fit you." Tarin made it a point to avoid the open air market when he could. It had originally been some park or playground for the city when it had been young. Now, with the lower city growing around the open space like a tree grows around a wire, the residents turned it into one huge market. It covered blocks, a good bit of it covered in canopies and tents all dyed in bright colors and all fading to one degree or another. Some people tossed down carpets and rugs and others had carts on wheels. The stalls were easily portable. Some stayed put for years, even generations, and some people were gone the next day. The only true permanent structures were the shops that lined the large open square but beyond that even the best of the tea rooms and stores inside the maze of commerce were little more than thin wood and fabric.

Tarin loved watching the people, the millions of interactions all going on at once. He could have sat and studied them for a lifetime. The colors, smells and sights of the people were endlessly fascinating. Just to browse the stalls would have pleased him, to move around as anyone else would and just shop, but he didn't have that option. He wasn't just anyone.

His face gave him away and his reputation, both as slave and swordsman, made sure that everyone knew what he looked like. It wasn't even like he could deny who he was and say they'd mistaken him for some other lavender-eyed, black-haired man. There simply was no way he could blend in, and the reactions he provoked were annoying at best and unpleasant at worst. It stole the market from him and made it a place that bitterly reminded him of how different he was.

So they crossed as little of the actual market as they could, Tarin moving them around the edges to reach the building on the perimeter. The lanes here were wider to accommodate coaches and the more expensive stalls had claimed the larger spaces. Dunn followed without questioning again, watching the people and noise and feeling suddenly deeply homesick for the ordered structure of his ship.

"Tarin Morris!" a man shouted from behind them.

Tarin stopped and turned carefully, his mouth tightening in displeasure. A small group of young men was coming from a tea room. They had abandoned their cups and conversation. It took only a quick glance to spot that the group, four in total, was following one man.

"Get back," he said softly to Dunn.

Dunn didn't ask why. He caught Tarin's glance over to the side, several paces away, and moved to make room for whatever was needed. He knew better than to waste time with words. He had been the one to teach Tarin that lesson when he was new on ship.

Tarin knew the four following by face if not by name. They were part of the continuous crop of young men, most barely old enough to shave, all trying to make names for themselves with swords. These were the people he tried to not meet as it was normally swordsmen from their level that he had to kill during a hire. Some actually had talent. Those were the ones he didn't mind defeating. It was the fool who ran away from his father's farm or shop thinking he could pick up a sword and suddenly be famous and rich that woke Tarin up in the middle of the night. Those were the ones that should never wield anything more skilled than an ax and yet they boldly thought they could take him and they died.

All four were armed and dressed in the simple clothes most swordsmen wore. They had taken to growing their hair longer in recent months in direct imitation of Tarin. He wondered sometimes if he started wearing purple leather and feathers if the others would follow in kind. The great swordsmen, the ones people talked about, almost always to a one were loners. Those that hung out in small groups were simply duel fodder.

Tarin dismissed the four followers. They hadn't called his name and he wasn't sure one of them had the spine to. It was the fifth, a man he didn't know on sight, that had called for his attention and was moving quickly toward him.

The fifth man wasn't overly handsome nor ugly. He was plain: plain brown hair, small, plain brown eyes, plain features and nothing remarkable of note about him. He was slightly taller than Tarin and wider and more muscled across the shoulders. There was something odd about his clothes, a different cut to the shirt and pants that spoke of someone from somewhere else, not provincial just from elsewhere. The sword he carried at his hip was expensive and showy with plenty of gilt and scroll work. The leather belt it hung from was well tooled and cost more than most people's boots.

"Tarin Morris?" he questioned now that he was a few paces away.

The people in the tea shop, those browsing local stalls, anyone within earshot had taken notice of the called out name and were watching. A rapidly growing crowd in the tea shop were placing bets, whispering back and forth and Tarin noted that Dunn was making his way over toward them. He eased his eyes from those around him to the man trying to get his attention.

The swordsman was older than he'd first thought, older than the boys he was socializing with and maybe even a few years older than Tarin himself. Which, all in all, wasn't very old but mid twenties was a good age for a professional swordsman. The four men he was having tea with would be lucky to live to see twenty-one.

"Yes," Tarin answered smoothly and kept his hand casually near his sword.

"My name is Arkin Harvis, I'm told you're the best swordsman in the city."

Tarin watched how the other man shifted his weight, watched how he balanced and stood, and knew that Arkin Harvis, unlike his young friends, had blood on his sword. "You've been

misinformed, you're looking for Benshear Vask."

"No, I'm looking for you. You know, you're not the easiest man to get in touch with." His accent had a whispery slur. Combined with his clothes Tarin guessed he was from the south.

"Well, you found me, what do you want?"

"Your job of course."

Tarin sighed at the sheer predictability of it all. "Of course, so work your way up and we'll see."

"No, we'll see now."

"I don't fight just because I have a sword, I fight for hire."

"You're afraid."

"No, I'm busy. If you'll excuse me?" Tarin stretched out his words, using the aristocratic accent to his advantage. It was more insulting than words could be.

Harvis took his purse from his belt and threw it. The heavy coins in the bottom clinking. Tarin didn't move and let it fall at his feet. "There, you've been paid, now fight." He drew his sword with practiced skill and took his guard.

Tarin didn't move, not for several heartbeats. The whispering crowd was frenzied, the bets passing hands rapidly and the women fluttering over the drama. They were all staring. He was on display again as he'd always been.

When he did move it was sudden and with no warning. His blade slid free faster than it had a right to and rather than taking his own guard he carried the motion into an attack. It was short lived. He twisted around Harvis' blade and pulled. The man's arms were strong but his wrists weren't and they weren't nearly flexible enough. The blade snapped free with a gasp from the crowd. Before Harvis could react Tarin had his edge at the other man's throat.

Harvis stood very still, his sword arm still hanging in mid air, his eyes steady. Tarin held that moment, watching for any further signs of threat. "As I said, I'm too busy for games today but know that I damned well will kill you the next time you want to play." He kept his sword sharp and the edge drew a shallow mark on the other man's throat, the red line left as a reminder.

When the blade withdrew, Harvis stumbled a step backward, his hand coming up reflexively to the cut on this neck. Tarin kicked the purse and it scattered open, some of the coins rolling away. "Dunn?"

The older man nodded and separated himself from the crowd. Harvis didn't say a word, just edged backward moving neither to gather the coins or the sword. Both men were professionals; there was no need to speak further. Time would show whether Harvis wished to try again but now wasn't the moment for empty words.

"So how much did you win?" Tarin asked when they were half a block away.

"Two bishops, would have been more but everyone here had their money on you."

"So how'd you win so much?"

"I bet that you wouldn't kill him."

Tarin grinned. "Should have bet more, you could have bought your own clothes."

"You did too much, Tarin." Dunn followed along behind the younger man. They'd been debating the extent of their shopping venture for the last four blocks. Tarin had grown silent and quickened his pace and Dunn had been left hurrying to keep up. "Tarin," Dunn barked in his best commanding officer voice and grabbed hold of the other man's elbow.

That stopped him cold. "What?" he snapped back and he shook off the touch.

"I can't accept it." It had taken him a good six months to be able to hold Tarin's eye without looking away. The color was disturbing to stare into and when the swordsman was being stubborn his eyes grew even more difficult to take.

"Will you please shut up." He sighed and looked away, glancing quickly around before continuing. "Look, I wouldn't have made it two weeks in the guard, we both know that. I owe Chrisholm for picking me and I owe you for seeing to it I got along and could stay. Chrisholm is dead, I can't do anything about that, but you're right here and I can. I need to do this. It's not about you, okay, happy now? I'm doing this for purely selfish reasons so shut up, take what you need and if it comes to it, repay me with that favor." By the time he'd finished the words were almost being spat out. He had gone a little overboard in outfitting Dunn. The truth was, it had been fun. What good was money when you had no use for it? Tarin had enjoyed the day's conversations, picked up some fabric for Analeia and hadn't minded the coins.

Dunn didn't buy the reasons given for a moment but he nodded. "All right then. Thank you."

"You're welcome," Tarin snapped back in exasperation and took off again at full stride. It was late afternoon, getting on toward evening and his stomach was growling. He didn't wait to see if Dunn was following but set off for the Fleecy Sheep for dinner and to run the errand he hadn't been able to do the night before.

Dunn did follow and he didn't comment on the sign over the door. Neither did he comment on how the dozen or so people inside stopped talking for a moment when they saw Tarin. There was a second of exchanged looks and then the room went back to their games, food and drinks.

Tarin went over to the counter, Dunn following him, and took a seat there. "Afternoon, Jen. Owen around?" he asked the plump young woman behind the counter.

"I can go get him. Do you want dinner?" She eyed Dunn over and when she looked back to Tarin he saw the unspoken question there.

"Please, for us both. What are you drinking?" he asked Dunn.

Dunn drew a breath and then swallowed hard. "Whatever Tarin's having."

Jen nodded. "Right off." She fetched their drinks first, setting the heavy wood mugs in front of the two men before going off to find Owen.

Dunn sniffed his drink carefully before sipping it. It wasn't ale or even wine but a cool tea, unsweetened and quite good. He raised his eyebrows and took a deeper swallow.

"Don't look so surprised," Tarin teased.

"Sorry, I didn't figure you to be the tea sort, I mean, from the way you used to drink."

"Used to. If I go down it's going to be because I tried my hardest to stay alive and it wasn't enough, not because I was seeing double." His eyes scanned the room around them. "Truth is,

half the people in here don't touch anything stronger than tea. It's people like those boys that drink too much and get killed."

Owen came out of a door in the back, wiping his hands on a rag and moving quickly. "We had a friend of yours show up here," was the first thing he said.

Tarin looked over the large man, took in his squared shoulders and the tight line of his mouth and read it properly as anger. "I don't have any friends."

Owen snorted. "Arkin Harvis."

"Bloody hell, he's no friend of mine!"

"We know. He came in here a few hours ago, already drunk and with a flock of hanger ons. They started gaming and drinking, going on about you and not saying nice things. By then word had spread of your little display out in the market and the crowd started getting itchy."

"Is he dead?" Itchy in the Sheep often lead to bloody.

"Naw, not as far as I know anyway. He kept shooting off his mouth and some of the regulars told him to shut it."

"Which he didn't."

Owen shrugged. "He started going on about how things are done in Farickburn and what a big swordsman he was there, best in the city and blah blah blah." Owen snapped his fingers shut into his hand mocking Harvis wagging mouth and making Tarin grin.

"So, what happened?"

"Dozen or so decided to show him this isn't Farickburn and we do things differently here."

Tarin raised his eyebrows.

"We took him out back, roughed him up a bit and last I saw they were dragging him off to dump him in the river."

"But he was still breathing?"

"Breathing, hell, he was shouting. Going on about how you got lucky, how you cheated, about how your friends couldn't shut him up, that he was going to kill you. At least until they gagged him he was going on. Don't worry, we just knocked the wind out of him." Owen looked smug. "I won't have any snot nosed fool, from Farickburn none the less, talking bad about one of my patrons. Bad for business."

"We must maintain standards."

Owen wagged a finger at him. "Just so, just so. So has Jen gone off to get you and your," there was an ever so slight pause, just a half a breath but a pause, "friend dinner?"

Tarin nodded and took another swallow from his tea to clear the bad taste from his mouth. "Yes, she has and I've been rude. Owen, this is Elorin Dunn, he was second in command on the Dellore Dream. Sir, this is Owen Concarck, he owns this fine establishment."

"Your ship?" Owen made it a point to know as much about his people as he could.

"The very one."

"Nice to meet you." Owen tucked the rag into his belt and offered his hand to the man across the counter.

"And you," Dunn answered, accepting it.

"Dunn's family. Can you see word gets around I wouldn't take it kindly if someone goes after my uncle? He's already gotten less than generous treatment at the hands of our fair city." Tarin answered the unspoken question smoothly. Within a day no one would wonder at the nature of their relationship and he'd be able to stop doing this.

"Will do." He glanced over his shoulder to see Jen standing with their dinners. "I'll leave you two be so you can eat."

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Chapter Nine

They didn't eat in silence. Tarin nodded to different people as they came and went and told Dunn about them in quiet tones. Told all about how this one was one that did this and that one was afraid of this and Dunn grew impressed with the varied and vast knowledge Tarin had about the people that moved, worked and lived around him. A few of the company nodded to Tarin or tossed out a word or two in greeting but none dared to truly approach him and Dunn noted that as well.

The conversation and the food were both pleasant and enjoyable. Tarin did most of the talking which was unusual as he'd known the boy to listen a great deal more than speak. It wove a web of intimacy about the friends, for Dunn was sure now that they were friends and not just comrades, and finally Dunn spoke the question he'd had on his mind for months.

He related one of the stories of Tarin's exploits that Dunn had heard being told and retold while still on the Dream. When he'd finished he carefully add on the worry that had been bothering him. "The gossip says you're crazy, suicidal."

Tarin snorted at that and half shook his head. "I don't go looking to be killed, if that's what you're wanting to know." His accent was high and designed to annoy.

Dunn saw past the tone, ignored it and continued. "Some of the jobs you've taken, they look suicidal."

"They said I was suicidal when I accepted a job against Vask, yet here I am."

"So why'd you do it?"

"Because it paid well, because I knew he couldn't take me, because the more people think I'm totally crazy the easier my job becomes. I don't go looking to get killed." The younger man's voice faded away at the end.

"But?"

"But I'm tired, I'd welcome death if it came looking for me, at least most days anyway." He smiled some to take the edge from the too sharp words. "Don't worry so, I'm too proud to just give up but if ever someone comes along who can take me down, well, it'd be a mercy." His odd eyes stayed down, uncomfortable with the unaccustomed confidence. "And this is far too personal a subject to speak of sober and I've too much to do to afford getting drunk." His quick smile was back, charming and bright but it didn't touch his eyes.

"I know, lad, I know, we just were worried about you, back on deck. Some of the talk is a bit ... much." Dunn accepted the casual dismissal of the subject and knew their new friendship wouldn't take it being pushed.

"You should've known better. Half of everything said about me is utter lies."

"Lies encouraged by whom, I wonder?"

Dunn almost laughed at the innocent look that came over the young swordsman's face. They finished their food in easy and much lighter conversation. When they were ready, Tarin casually paid and nodded toward the door. "I don't think I'm going to learn what I need to know here, not tonight anyway. Come."

Dunn followed without questioning. The sun was almost fully set and he had a moment of shock to know that only the day before he was being pushed around by boys that a year ago wouldn't have dreamed of touching him. It had only been one day but things had changed so dramatically that the weeks of struggle felt a lifetime gone. He followed the swordsman with an uneasy sense of what might have been if not for the chance encounter.

"Morris! Wait up a moment!"

Tarin had reached the street and he turned to find the voice. He frowned when he spotted the young man running up the street toward him. His hand eased away from the hilt of his sword but he didn't relax. "Danni Westinck," he said softly to Dunn before the boy could catch up to them.

"I'm glad I caught you!" Danni said breathlessly. "I thought you'd still be in the Sheep." Danni was in his early twenties and dressed in plain and understated clothes. His boots were worn but well made and he stood slightly taller than Tarin. The plain and functional sword that hung from a plain and functional belt at his waist marked him as a swordsman but unlike the small flock of young men they'd come across earlier in the day, Danni was making no efforts to appear like Tarin. His hair was trimmed short and it flattered his upturned nose and general appearance of youth right down to the freckles. "Danni." Tarin nodded in greeting and relaxed as the young man made no move of threat. "What's wrong?"

"Wrong? Nothing! I owe you a word of thanks. The Glendale job you passed on, I got it Tarin!" The boy's face was flushed with excitement and pride. "Ten crowns. You were right, if I just kept trusting myself I'd get a break. It's the furthest up the hill I've ever been."

Tarin felt his stomach knot up but he smiled. "Congratulations! That's wonderful news, have you told your father?"

The boy grinned lopsidedly. "This afternoon. Ten crowns, Tarin, I'll be able to buy him out of the collar now, that'll just leave the mortgage on the store. It's the best thing that's ever happened to

us. And it's just the start, people will see me now, really see me." Danni's eyes gleamed with a hunger for all that he didn't have and saw just, almost, within his reach.

"It's a big step, are you ready for it? What if there's a challenge?" Tarin asked carefully. It was as close as he could come to warning the eager young man.

Danni waved it off. "I'll chance it. Vask is busy, you turned the job down so I'm guessing you're busy, I've fair odds with Gar and anyone else. Well, I'll risk it. Let a challenge come, I'll pay of the mortgage too!" His smile was warm and there was something puppy-like about the boy. "I'd risk almost anything for this chance."

"Congratulations again, it's a wonderful break. You should go in and tell them all the good news."

"I think I'll do that! Thank you, thank you again, if you hadn't turned this one down, I'd never have had the chance." He wanted to shake the older swordsman's hand but no one touched Tarin, ever. So he grinned again and nearly skipped off to the Sheep to spread the good news.

Tarin watched the other swordsman until he disappeared inside. "I need to go home," he said softly to Dunn's questioning look.

They made it several blocks away before Tarin had to stop, his stomach turned over and he vomited into the gutter. Dunn stood by in the darkness and didn't try to offer comfort or help and didn't speak until the younger man rejoined him several paces away.

"Are you okay?"

Tarin shook his head in the moonlight. "No. He's a good kid, has real talent but he's not a swordsman, he's a shopkeeper. It's not in him to be a killer, he shouldn't be doing this at all, he's just trying to keep his family together. His father sold himself into a collar to keep them from losing their store and they're close to making it, real close, but the mortgage is killing them. Danni's uncle had been a swordsmen, so he thought he could get them all ahead by trying it too. He's only doing this to pay off the mortgage and buy back his father. He isn't a swordsman." The words came tumbling out.

"Can you tell him to not take the job?"

"I can't say more than I have. Not in a situation like this. My hands are tied. I can't even offer to pay him more to not do it. He's already committed and I'd never get another hire." He ran a hand reflexively over his hair, checking to make sure it was still securely tied back. It was a motion that had become habit.

"Do you have to kill him? Can't you just disable him?"

"I don't know. It's to death, the hired sword has to be down for good before the challenge is allowed to be pressed. I'd have to take off his leg or arm or something to spare his life. He still could easily die, he'd most likely bleed to death right there. I could kill him cleanly, he'd not suffer. I don't want to kill him. Why of all the people did Glendale hire him?" He leaned against the wall of a building and felt his stomach turn over again but this time he didn't get sick. "I don't want to kill him."

"Is he a risk? It doesn't make sense to try to deliver a blow that will give him a chance to live if it means risking your own life."

"He's good, inexperienced but he's good. Good speed, timing, balance and his uncle taught him when he was a child so a lot of what he knows is instinct. I was thinking he'd either go back to their shop or, if he lived, replace Vask one day." He pushed off from the wall. "At least I know what I needed to find out. As if this job wasn't difficult enough! I need to go home."

The rest of the walk home was in silence and Dunn began to understand why Tarin kept himself so distant from the lives around him. When they reached his building Tarin was surprised to see lights on in his room so he went up carefully but wasn't surprised to find Analeia inside.

She was on her knees, a bucket set beside her and she was angrily scrubbing at the stone of the fireplace. He stopped in the doorway and was surprised to find her actually cleaning. Ana looked up at him standing, gawking, in the doorway, blew a length of hair out of her eyes and then with no warning hurled the scrub brush at him with all her strength.

Tarin moved backwards and shut the door. The brush hit the wood with a resounding smack and clattered to the floor. He looked to Dunn who looked back with thinly concealed amusement. "My," Dunn said casually, "what a lovely view of the stars. I think I'll stay out here for a little while and enjoy it."

Tarin nodded gratefully. "Thank you."

He opened the door carefully, half expecting the bucket to follow the path of the brush, but found Ana just where he'd last seen her, except she sat on the stone with her arms folded under her chest. "Ana?" he asked carefully and shut the door behind him. Stacked beside the door were their purchases from the afternoon and the scrub brush was dripping beside it.

"You're a real son of a bitch, do you know that?" she snarled out and considered throwing the bucket at him.

He nodded calmly. "You aren't the first to say so."

"And won't be the last! Some nerve you have. You throw me out last night without a word and then hire me to be your cleaning lady?"

"I don't blame you for being angry."

"Good!" she shouted and stood up, drying her hands on her skirt.

"And I didn't intend for you to actually do any cleaning."

"Again, good!"

"I'm sorry for last night."

She stood firm for a moment but then she sighed and her face softened. "I don't want you to be sorry, I just want to know what happened." It was almost impossible for her to stay angry with him and he didn't even have to try to gain her good side. There was just something about him.

He wanted to deny it, he wanted to lie to her or tell her it was nothing or none of her concern but he ended up shaking his head and lowering himself into a chair. "I'm not sure I can explain it in a way that would make any sense."

She slid over and sat by his legs. "Was it, is it me?"

"No, by all means it wasn't you!" The very thought surprised him and it showed on his face. He wasn't sure he would or could continue but she just sat there looking up at him waiting. "Ana, you know I care for you?" That was painful to say.

She nodded. "I like to believe so."

"I can't ever love you, not in the way you should be loved. It's not in me, they saw to that."

"I'm not asking you to love me, I'm not a starry-eyed girl, I know what a swordsman's life is like." She wanted to touch him, to soothe the distant pain that lurked behind his eyes but she held still, afraid a touch would shatter the moment.

He looked away and felt himself starting to blush and hoped it would stop. "I don't just mean emotionally, I can't ever be with you. No matter how much I want it, they've taken that from me as well. I can't bear it any longer."

"That's why you don't let anyone touch you." A lot of what she knew about him suddenly made perfect sense, things she had just accepted as his personal oddities became clear. "Oh, Tarin, what did they do to you?" she asked in a whisper but she knew: they'd broken him and he still hadn't been able to put the pieces back together.

"It doesn't matter now, what's done is done but I can't, we can't, I'm not right. It's not you, I can't, I just can't. I'm sorry, I shouldn't have even tried last night." There was something desperate in his eyes and he prayed she wouldn't ask any more of him than he could give. "I can't ever be more to you than I already am, I don't have it in me. I hope that it's enough."

In that instant she knew without a doubt that she loved him and would never love anyone in the same way, no matter how long she lived. She also knew it was utterly stupid and pointless and didn't care. "Of course it's enough, what kind of heartless shrew do you think I am?"

That shook off some of his distance. "About the cleaning, I just thought it would be an easy way for you to drop by without having to hide. I didn't mean it to sound cold."

"I know, I just was feeling hurt, I thought last night that I'd offended you or repulsed you. I know how plain I am and how, well, how plain you aren't. I know you could have anyone you wanted and I'm nothing."

"Ana," he waited until she met his eye to continue, "if I were able to, you wouldn't be safe alone in my rooms. And you are not plain, I think you're quite lovely."

She smiled and wanted to believe it was more than idle flattery. When he wanted to be, he was far too charming for his own good. "If you think that will get me to do your washing, you've another think coming."

"I wouldn't dream of it. I bought you something today while I was out." It only took a moment to find the fabric. It had been wrapped in plain paper and delivered with the rest. He pulled the paper back and unfolded it. It was well woven and of a quality she never would have purchased herself. The color was a rich warm brown patterned in small stripes in various harvest colors. It suited both her coloring and her temperament well.

She fingered the soft material in awe. "Tarin, why?"

"You did say you wanted to make a new skirt. Well, it should be enough here for a dress or a skirt or whatever."

"Tarin, it's too much, this fabric is what they sell on the Hill, it must have cost a fortune."

"Don't worry about the cost. Do you like it? They had other styles but I thought this was the one you'd like best."

"Like it? I love it! Thank you."

"You're welcome." Her smile warmed him. "If you don't mind, Dunn's outside. We should invite him in before he catches cold."

Next Chapter

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A Springtime Duel

Chapter Ten

They made tea and Ana demanded to hear the entire story of the run in with Arkin Harvis. Tarin let Dunn do most of the talking, choosing to stay silent about the whole affair and letting his thoughts worry over what to do about the coming fight with Danni. Time was far too short for as many things as he needed to finish. When he was certain the two of them were comfortable with each other he stood.

"If neither of you mind, I need to run an errand." When neither objected, he offered a casual half smile to try to lighten the mood which had suddenly grown heavy. "Ana, stay as long as you'd like. Sir, just take the bed when you're tired, I might be out late."

They sat in silence as he moved with his normal fluid grace to scoop up his cloak and slide out the door into the night. Ana waited until the door shut behind him to sigh. "He's upset over something; he always walks when he's worried. He must be working a job."

Dunn nodded. "On ship, he'd stare out at the sea for half the night and never complain when it was his turn to stand watch; said it gave him time to think. He never complained about anything as I recall."

"What was he like back then?" She leaned forward, almost desperate to learn more and hating feeling as needy as she always did around the swordsman.

"Quiet, he was very quiet," Dunn answered simply.

"Oh, come on, there has to be more to it than quiet."

Dunn laughed at that. "Well, he was desperate to learn anything. Some of the crew thought he was trying to gain favor, but he wanted to learn from anyone, even those with no chance of helping or advancing him. It was just his way. If he saw someone could do or knew something he didn't, he'd ask and learn it. He didn't master it all, but he had this need to know a little bit about everything he could. They say all Spotters are like that."

"Spotters?"

"Folks that can spot storms. There's a handful of them in the fleet. Once we taught him how to watch for storms and such you could walk up to him and say 'Tarin, how's the weather looking?' and he'd tell you 'It'll be clear for another day but then we'll hit rain and stay in it for three or more days'. Sure enough, we'd hit rain. Or you could ask 'Tarin, where's land?' and he'd point to it, even below deck and far out, and he'd always peg the closest landfall, not just which direction

was shore." Dunn shook his head a little. "Damnedest thing I'd ever seen. I'd heard of Spotters, even met a few of them over the years, but I'd never seen anyone do it."

"So how'd he do it?"

"Don't ask me. When I asked him once he just shrugged and said he simply knew." He looked over to the plain woman who so earnestly seemed to care for the swordsman. "Do you love him?"

Ana swallowed her sharp retort, the first answer to come to her mind and oddly, found herself answering truthfully. "Yes. I won't speak of it and I would hope you won't either."

Dunn nodded. "I won't say a word. I'd imagine he's not the easiest of men to love. He's had a difficult time of it. It would have been bad enough had he been that pretty and born a girl."

"I can't imagine what they put him through. He's been so odd these last few days. It's not been one thing I can point to. I'm worried about him. If he's working a job in this mood, it won't work out well." She looked to Dunn for reassurance. Tarin never spoke of work to her and she knew better than to ask. But Dunn had been his commanding officer, that counted toward something and often times a man would tell another man something he'd never tell a woman.

Dunn offered her no comforting words and simply turned back to his tea.

Tarin hurried down his steps, pulling his cloak over his shoulders more to keep out an emotional chill than the increasing damp of the night. It was rude to leave them both alone but his time was running out and he trusted they would get along just fine without him.

The night was almost a welcoming embrace as he stepped out into the echoing streets. Voices bounced around the buildings, lights glowed around shutters and the lower city was alive. When he had stood up to leave he thought he had to go out into the night to think. Now he knew differently and found his feet carrying him where he needed to be before his mind understood.

It was rare that he went so far into the city. After four years off the sea he hadn't so much as visited the wharf since he'd been released. The ground sloped downward and gradually leveled off as the smell of the sea thickened the air. It drew up in him a bittersweet, almost homesick feeling that he struggled to put aside. It wasn't the docks he was headed to.

The warehouses were squared up in their own little district. Tall and long, the plain buildings were almost appealing in their ugly efficiency. He'd never been down here, never explored the small maze the blunt-edged buildings made even during his nighttime wanderings, so it took a little effort to find the one warehouse he was seeking.

The entrance was lit with a lamp but there was no sense of welcome from it. He went down the walk and up the three tiled steps with a feeling he was trespassing. The door was locked, but a pull cord hung beside it. He tugged on it and waited.

It wasn't a long wait, but it felt like a small forever before the door unlocked and cracked open. "What?" a man called out around the crack.

"I'm looking for Burtro Westinck."

"You found him, what do you want?" The door pushed open and a man of late middle years stood inside. A loose metal collar hung about his neck, his hair was cut short and his dress was

simple.

"A word, I won't keep you."

Burtro peered, trying to see under the hood of the man's cloak. "You know me and I don't know you."

"I'm sorry," Tarin said as he pushed back his hood, seeing for the first time how this must look to the man to have a hooded stranger asking for him. He offered his hand. "My name is—"

"Tarin Morris." Burtro looked to the hand with suspicion. No one offered to shake hands with a slave.

"Yes. Might I have a word with you?" He kept his hand out, kept the offer standing.

The older man accepted the offer gratefully and nodded his head. "Come in from the chill." He pushed the door open behind him and it let into a small, plain room. There were a few lamps lit, a desk and a few simple chairs. It was a waiting room during the day and where the watchman spent the night. "Sit."

"Thank you." Tarin nodded and perched on the edge of one of the hard chairs.

"Danni speaks a lot about you. Says you've been good to him. It's mighty kind of you. I assume this is about him." He settled back into his chair with a weary groan and a passing rub at the permanent ache in his knee. "Can't imagine anyone would hire you at your rates to kill a nobody like me!"

"Danni is a fine young man, he has a lot of talent." Now that he was here he wasn't sure what he was doing.

"So, what can I do for you?" Burtro tried not to stare. He'd never laid eyes on the swordsman before but Danni had gone on and on about him. That had included a description of the man's appearance and past. There was no doubt who the stranger was, but Burtro found himself equally shocked at how unbelievable his looks really were and how quietly polite his manner was. Danni had said as much but he hadn't believed his son.

"Danni told you about his latest hire?"

The slave smiled at that. "Aye! Right proud of himself too. Near to bursting wanting to tell you about it, says if you hadn't passed on the job he'd never have had the chance."

Tarin sat silent, all the words that had run across his mind while he walked had vanished. He was alone in a room with a proud father and all he suddenly felt was a deep-rooted envy for Danni Westinck. He had to shake away the thought to find the words to speak. "I know how important this job is to him and to all of your family." That wasn't what he wanted to say, he tried again. "You see, there's a way of things, an order. Danni understands this. We have to do things a certain way or everything falls apart. Do you understand?"

Burtro's brow was crinkled up in confusion. "I'm not sure I follow."

Tarin sighed. "I respect your son, I respect his reasons for becoming a swordsman." That made the father smile again and it only made what he was trying to say more difficult. "I know something about your son's job, something I can't tell him. If I were him, nothing said to me by anyone would change my mind about taking this job. I don't expect it to change his mind."

"He's to be challenged," the older man said with certainty and when Tarin looked away, hiding the truth in his eyes the slave nodded. "Aye, he is and you know of it." Burtro gathered what

remained of his pride about him. "I won't tell him to quit the job, the boy won't listen to me. I've been asking him to stop this foolishness for a year. Too much of my brother in him."

"I'm not asking you to sway his choice, that isn't how it should be."

"Then what are you asking?"

Tarin wanted to know the answer to that one himself. "I have influence over this situation. Danni is good, but I don't think he can win. I may be able to prevent it being a killing blow but it will cripple him. I don't know if I should use my influence. I've never been faced with a situation like this. I can't speak to Danni, and if I did I know what he'd say."

"He'd tell you to shut up and mind your own affairs is what he'd say." Burtro nodded, knowing his son far too well.

Tarin grinned. "Yes, something like that." He didn't tell the father that Danni would never phrase it so bluntly. "Since you are the head of his family, collar or no collar, I thought I should speak to you." He woke up at nights sometimes with the faces of the hopeful swordsmen he'd killed haunting him. The last thing he wanted was Danni's face added to that list.

Burtro leaned back and thought for a moment. He wasn't a slow or stupid man and he had a pretty good idea of who it was that was to offer the challenge. "Mr. Morris, you tell this person you have influence over that they're to do their job and Danni will do his. Tell him, both know what they're getting into and that Danni isn't doing this blindly. Tell him, I'd appreciate my son's life being spared but if either swordsman compromises their honor, well, they'd be better off dieing cleanly."

"I'll tell him. I'm sorry for having bothered you."

"No bother. As you can see, I'm not very busy. Could be worse work. I guess they figure all an old man is good for is keeping watch but you won't be hearing me tell them differently!" He stood when Tarin stood and knew the other man understood.

"Wisely said. I hope you have a good night, sir."

"And you, and you." The elder Westinck nodded and followed the swordsman to the door but stopped short of opening it. "Mr. Morris, Danni won't hear of this visit from me. I do know some of the ways you swordsmen work, but it was kind of you to speak to me in advance. Thank you." He pulled the door open as he finished speaking.

"You're welcome," Tarin answered feebly as he slipped back out into the night.

He couldn't say he felt any better over the idea that he'd have to kill Danni Westinck, but he didn't feel so helpless now. Somewhere he'd picked up the idea that the rest of Danni's family were blind to the cold truth of the line of work he was in, that Danni was an idealist and unaware of reality. Knowing that they all were aware helped a little but it was a lot easier when the person on the other end of the sword didn't have a family or a history.

His thoughts weren't so guilty, but they weren't any calmer as he wove his way back toward his rooms. The path he chose was the long one, taking his time and letting the night cool some of the disquiet from his mind. He found himself reviewing what he knew of how Danni fought and mentally running a fight with the younger man. It was good planning and something he'd made a habit of doing before any fight.

Movement across the street caught his eye. There was something out of place about it and he followed it as the person ducked from the shadows and down an alley. They moved wrongly, differently, and he couldn't place just why he felt that way. As they slipped down the street he

saw they clutched a blanket around them and he remembered how the runaway Feral had huddled with the tightly clutched blanket over her own shoulders.

Cursing himself as a fool, he crossed the street and moved to the alley. He had to cure himself of this. Twice now he'd gone off chasing an idea of someone and it made no sense. While he hated slavery and disagreed with the general treatment of the native feral people of the woods, he'd never once had an itch to do anything against either. No one had ever bothered to raise a finger in protest of his own treatment when he'd worn a collar and he'd had it a thousand times worse than any Feral. The nagging need to check for the runaway was a new and somewhat disturbing one.

The alley was a dead end, he could see that much clearly, but the form that huddled in the back corner was difficult to make out. When he moved into the alley, they pulled tighter against the wall but made no other effort to move. "Hello?" he asked as he moved down the way. "I don't want to hurt you."

He squinted against the dark and tried to make out anything about the person. It was a woman, he was fairly certain of that, but if it was the Feral he couldn't say. He moved carefully, keeping his hands out where the woman could see them. Even if it wasn't the Feral and just a homeless woman, he didn't feel like getting stabbed. "It's okay now, it's okay." He tried to make his voice soothing as he moved closer. The woman made no effort to move and as he got within a few feet of her he could hear her crying, softly, in the shadows.

She glanced up as he crouched down beside her and there was no doubt now, the collar around her neck glinted in the dim light and Tarin made out the shape of her eyes. There were tears on her face and he saw them before she swung out and hit him hard enough to force him to stumble backwards. The blow was weak from her exhaustion and as she surged to her feet he followed and wrapped his arms around her.

She bucked and squirmed, but he'd learned a thing or two over the years in all the bodyguard jobs he'd gotten. She wasn't going anywhere now that he had a solid grip on her. "Easy, easy!" he hissed and pulled her back into the shadows. "If you go out there now, someone will find you and take you back and they will kill you. Do you understand me? Do you want to die?"

She struggled one more time and then, with a sobbed breath, fell still. "Why do you care?" Her voice was oddly accented, but she spoke his language well.

"I don't know." His own voice sounded strained from the long events of the day and had none of his normal control.

Next Chapter

Story Home

Home

A Springtime Duel

Chapter Eleven

"I don't know why but, like a fool, I do." He felt her relax a little in his arms at his honesty. "If I'd wanted to hurt you, I'd have done it by now but I can't help you if you don't trust me." She didn't answer so he shook her a little. "Yes or no because I've had a really long day and if you don't want my help I'll happily walk away."

"Yes," she answered at last, weakly and when he released her she stumbled backwards.

"Good, we have to get you off the streets." His place was out, so was Shelee's. "Drop that blanket," he ordered as he unclasped his own cloak. When she'd dropped the thin fabric he covered her with his cloak and settled it about her shoulders. She wasn't overly tall and the hem would drag but that didn't matter, it was plenty large enough to hide her in its depth and the hood covered her head, face and more importantly the collar and eyes totally. "Now, follow by my side, keep your head down and by all means don't let anyone see under that hood. Do you understand?"

She nodded and clutched the cloak tight around her. "Yes, I understand."

There was only one place he could think of. It was down by the docks and easily the nicest inn anywhere in the lower city. They catered to wealthy travelers having to spend the night near the docks for an early tide or those who arrived too late to travel up the city to the more respectable inns. As he moved back out onto the street the woman followed at his side and he had to wonder what he was doing. He was too busy as it was and this was the last thing he needed but here he was sticking his nose in where it didn't belong.

They moved as quickly as the woman could go and they made good time down to the docks. Tarin managed to avoid most groups of people until they grew closer to the busy district where whores offered their services from alleyways, taverns spilled music and light out into the night and people moved about in carefree celebration of arriving into port safely.

"Stay close," he said to her as they moved into the foot traffic and he kept a hand on her back and his eyes open.

A few people recognized him and stopped to whisper to their friends and stare as he passed but his luck held and no one he knew well enough to speak to crossed his path. The gawking onlookers who might have been brave enough to try to say something to him quickly changed their mind when he caught their eye.

The Deep Harbor sat at a quieter end of the docks and a block inland. It was a large and stately-looking place surrounded by an iron fence and set away from its more robust and common neighboring taverns. There was music inside but it was quieter and the whole place tried a little too hard to look respectable. Tarin led his strange charge to the main door and opened it for her, guiding her inside.

The main room wasn't filled with rough wood furniture and smoke-blackened beams. Instead there were rugs on the tile floor and cloths over the small, private tables. Carefully dressed servers moved among the crowd who sat in small groups and ate in subdued care. Tarin saw several tables were filled with Naval officers but none were people he knew on sight.

He felt oddly underdressed and out of place. Everyone was fine and carefully in style and it reminded him pointedly of the houses on the Hill. Eyes slowly swung toward him and the cloaked figure at his side with the muddy hem dragging on the entrance way. Conversation paused before recognition dawned and the gossip started. Tarin didn't make it a half dozen steps inside before a stern looking woman arrived to stand in his way.

"Can I help you?" she asked in an imitation of the Hill accent.

"No, you cannot," he answered icily in his real accent and pinned her with his eyes. "Fetch the owner and don't make me wait."

She paused but bobbled her curtsey and responded to the tone and accent as much as the words. "Yes, m'lord."

The owner arrived almost instantly. He was an aging, slender man with too few strands of hair and dressed to perfection without so much as a stray piece of lint. "Mr. Morris, I'm honored!" he began at once and didn't offer his hand to the swordsmen.

"You are the owner?"

"I am, sir, I am. How can I be of service?" He eyed the cloaked figure at Tarin's side before smiling warmly again.

"I've heard your inn has an outstanding reputation. I require lodging, one with a private bathing room and a staff that can follow precise orders. Have I come to the right place?" Tarin asked as he casually flipped a few crowns in the palm of his hand.

The owner looked to the coins and smiled broadly. "I have just such a suite available. Will you be wanting it right away?"

"This instant. I don't fancy standing in your doorway like a beggar all night."

"Of course, of course, just this way, sir."

Tarin followed the man as he moved quickly across the room and to a wide stairway. The suite was on the second floor in the back and when the door opened Tarin knew it was one of the middle level rooms. It was one room, but a large one, with a big bed and a dresser made to look fancy but the wood was cheap. The same went for the carvings on the fireplace: they were made to look expensive but it was all paste and cheap wood. The lamps were brass, not silver or gilt and the rug was worn where the desk and chair set over it. But, it was private, had the door leading off to its own bathing room and a large bed covered in acceptable linens.

He surveyed it and sighed. "This will have to do." He made it clear the room was barely acceptable and even though he was a swordsman he understood the difference between real and faked quality. "You will never enter these rooms, none of your staff will enter these rooms. This rule will not be broken. Meals will be brought and left on a tray outside the door. You will knock twice and leave. The empty trays will be left outside when we are finished with them and may be collected as you will. Under no circumstance is anyone to disturb my client. Is this clear?"

The owner nodded. "Yes, m'lord, I'll see the staff is informed."

"Good, you may go and send up dinner now. It doesn't have to be fancy, I know the hour is late, but we're quite hungry." He half turned away from the man in dismissal.

"Yes, m'lord. How long, may I ask, will m'lord be staying with us?"

"I'm not certain yet." He held out and dropped the three crowns into the owner's hand. "I'm sure that will cover expenses." Tarin arched an eyebrow in casual acceptance of tossing large sums of money around and wondered with veiled amusement what this would do to his reputation of being extraordinarily tight with coin.

"Quite cover it, thank you, m'lord." The man backed toward the door. "I'll see that dinner is brought up right away. There is brandy in the room. What else would m'lord require?"

"Only tea. Now, leave us."

Tarin didn't watch the man leave but as soon as the door shut behind him he moved swiftly to turn the inside lock. The feral woman stood where he'd left her, standing in the too large cloak in the center of the room with her face still turned downward so when he moved toward her and lowered the hood she looked up in surprise at their surroundings.

He took back his cloak and tossed it over the back of a chair. "I'll stay until the food arrives but then I have to go. I'll try to be back tonight. Stay here, rest, get cleaned up, whatever, but stay in these rooms and stay out of sight."

Tarin had a moment now to really look at the woman. She looked older than he was and the arms showing from the simple dress were strong. Her skin looked even darker next to his own paleness. Her slanted eyes were warmly hazel and the auburn of her hair was trimmed short. Even under the dirt and exhaustion she was an attractive woman. "It's safe here?" she asked in disbelief.

"As safe as it's going to get for you while you're in our city. This place will follow orders because they like the money and I've paid them well."

She trembled and sat down hard on the floor. Tarin knelt after her. "Hey, now, are you hurt?"

She managed to shake her head no but when he urged her to stand it was mostly from his strength that she rose back to her feet. She was blinking back tears and trying to look stern.

"That's better. It'll be a moment before they bring dinner up, why don't you go clean up some." He pushed her a little toward the bathing room and she followed the suggestion with the force of an order.

When she'd shut the door behind her, Tarin dropped himself into a chair and tried to think of what to do next. The only thought that would come to mind was why, why was he doing this? He'd never cared a moment for the bad situation others were in, never nosed in where he wasn't welcome, so why was he doing it now?

The answers didn't come forward as easily as the questions and the two knocks on the door gave him something else to think about. He waited a moment before opening the door but when he did the hallway was empty but for a heavily laden tray and a tea service. Tarin brought both in and set them on the desk, inspecting the quality more out of curiosity than care. The food sent up was plentiful and, unlike the room, of a very fine quality. He nodded in satisfaction.

When the door opened behind him he turned to see the feral woman standing, still in her dirty, plain dress but her face and arms were washed. She looked to him and then to the food with obvious hunger.

"Please, eat, you must be starving." He backed away from the desk and watched at how carefully she went to the food.

She ate hungrily for a few bites but then stopped. "Tell me now, what do you want?"

He felt her eyes weighing him, judging him. "I don't want anything."

"So you spend money and risk your neck for nothing? Maybe you're one of your people who wonder what it's like with a Feral woman?" She raised an eyebrow in suggestion.

Tarin felt himself starting to blush. It was considered one step above laying with an animal to bed a Feral and while he didn't believe they were so sub-human, if he wasn't going to bed Ana the idea alone of a Feral was the farthest from his mind. "No, I've never wondered that. I'd imagine

it'd be just like bedding one of our own women. I need to go out for a while, I can't get that collar off of you without some help. Will you stay here?"

She nodded, staring at him oddly. "Yes and allow no one to enter."

"Good, I'll be back." He turned and unlocked the door and left quickly.

He didn't delay on his way back to his rooms and went as quickly as he could manage. The distance seemed to be working against him and he was frustrated at how far it was but grateful he wasn't thinking about Danni any longer.

When he finally reached his building he went right to his rooms, figuring Dunn would know what Ana had said when she left and that would be the clue to finding her quickly. He opened the door and froze in the doorway, surprised to find Ana still sitting at the table talking cheerfully with Dunn.

"Tarin?" she asked, puzzled at the startled look on his face.

He looked to Dunn and knew his commanding officer would never understand this. "Ana, I need a favor, can you come with me?"

She looked to Dunn but stood up. "Of course." She waited until they'd shut the door behind them to ask. "What's wrong?"

"I can't explain it, you wouldn't believe me if I tried."

She froze at the bottom of the steps. "Let me judge that." And folded her arms under her breasts.

He sighed but moved as close to her as he could and spoke just above a whisper, explaining everything to her in as few words as he could. "So, will you help?"

"Of course but I don't understand."

He looked lost. "Neither do I."

"Hang on, let me get a change of my clothes and a few things from my room."

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Chapter Twelve

Ana muttered a little bit as they made the long walk down to the wharf but didn't question him. The few things she gathered from her room turned out to be a small pack's worth. She slung it

over one shoulder and refused to let him take it from her.

"I'm sorry to involve you in this, I just didn't know who else I could trust to ask," he finally said as they grew closer to the inn, walking nearer toward her side as they entered the rougher and wilder dock district.

"I don't understand, but I don't mind. Besides, I've always wanted to see inside the Deep Harbor. We should have brought Dunn along." She found his protective stance toward her amusing. Most of her free time was spent down around the back alleys of the docks. This had been her favorite playground as a child and even now she knew it better than her own hand.

"Dunn's a good man, but he's spent his entire life following orders and rules. I don't think he'd be helpful." He led her up to the entrance of the inn. The lights were a dimmer now that evening had gone into late night but people still sat about tables talking. "Stay close to me and don't look around," he said softly.

Ana snorted. "I know how to behave."

When Tarin let himself into the room he found it empty and, for a moment, his heart sank. "Hello?" he called out and moved to let Ana enter the room and shut the door behind her.

The bathing room door cracked open and the Feral woman peeked out. "I took your warning seriously about not being seen."

Tarin nodded and motioned to Ana. "This is a friend of mine. She'll be able to get that collar off of you."

Ana stood unusually silent, staring at the exotic woman. "Tarin," she began softly after an awkward moment, "I've never seen one of them up close."

"Well, she speaks our language. Just remember, I was called a thing too; appearances are deceiving."

She drew a breath and nodded. "Right, I'm sorry," she began to the other woman who stood in the bathing room doorway and watched everything silently. "I'm handling this badly. I am Ana, I'd like to help you. Please, go back in there and sit down, I've an idea."

The feral woman looked to Tarin before nodding and disappearing back inside. Ana stole a look to the swordsman and quickly looked away. "You're working a job aren't you? Not this, something else."

He nodded but didn't answer further.

"When is it?"

"Tomorrow night."

"We might be able to get her out tonight. I know a man who works the east gate. He goes off shift just before dawn and I think we can slide her past him with no questions. That'll mean you'll get almost no sleep tonight, and if you're working a job tomorrow night it won't be good to be tired." She was worried now. The job had to be serious for how much he'd been consumed by it.

"I'll manage."

"No, you won't. I'm going to be a while with her. Lay down, take a nap. I'll wake you when we're done. Okay?"

He shook his head. "I can't do that."

"Of course you can, what's she going to do? At least lay down and rest, you have to be exhausted."

He agreed only to make her happy and stretched out on the soft bed intending to only rest, not to sleep. There was a moment of drowsy half awareness but it was brief before he dropped soundly asleep.

He awoke confused and near panicked from images that faded away when he was startled awake. He reached for his sword but it was impossible to draw while lying down. A hand rested on his shoulder and it startled the last of the dreams away.

"Shh, it's okay, you were having a bad dream." Ana was perched on the edge of the bed and spoke in a soothing tone. She'd finished in the bathing room and found Tarin, curled up in a ball on the bed. He was mumbling in his sleep and trembling. She figured it wasn't a pleasant dream.

"I fell asleep," he answered dully.

"Yes, you did. Amazing." She soothed a loose piece of hair off his face and he didn't flinch away. "We're ready if you are."

He blinked owlishly for a moment but then looked past Ana to stare in wonder. "Oh my." There was little doubt she was a feral but you really had to look to see it now. Ana had dressed the other woman in some of her own clothes, and being in a normal skirt and bodice did help the image but she hadn't stopped there. Somehow she'd dyed the feral's hair a deep walnut color. None of the telltale auburn remained. With it brushed out loose and partly covered in a head cloth as a lot of women used when traveling or working, she easily passed on first glance as one of them.

Ana could have stopped there and counted on the darkness of pre dawn to do the rest for her but she hadn't. She'd borrowed some of her sisters cosmetics and with them she'd changed the woman's skin from coppery golden to something closer to a more normal tan on her neck, hands and face. She'd used kohl to subtly change the outlined shape of the woman's eyes too and now, upon casual inspection, the feral could have been one of a thousand lower city women bustling about her early morning chores.

"Do you like?" Ana asked expectantly.

"You've outdone yourself."

That made her smile, pleased at surprising him. "It'll all wash out or off and we'd better pray it doesn't rain before she reaches the countryside. I have her collar in my pack. I'll drop it in the river later today and I have a pack for her; there's a blanket in it and some food. It's not much but it should hold her until she reaches her people. She'll have to take your cloak though, I don't have a spare."

"That's fine," he replied in general awe. "What would I do without you?"

"You tell me." She meant to tease back but it came out sounding far too serious "Anyway," she flashed a quick smile, "if you're set to do this, we should be moving."

They wrapped the feral up in his cloak and moved as casually as they could while maintaining some speed. It was still several hours before dawn, but the time it would take to reach the

Eastern gate would leave little of the darkness to them. This was Tarin's favorite time of the night. Even those that prowled about were seeking their own rooms or beds. The stillness was almost something tangible and it felt as if everyone and thing were holding their breath, waiting for the dawn.

When they reached the gate, Ana led them to the smaller, pedestrian doorway and not the wide and well traveled main entrance. She whispered for them to wait a few paces away before knocking. The man that pulled the door open smiled in the spilled light from inside and greeted her warmly. She let him pull her into an embrace that hinted they knew each other far more than casually. Tarin couldn't make out all of what she quickly said but did make out how the man shook his head.

"Come on," he heard Ana whisper more loudly as she turned to look at them, "her husband will be awake in a few hours and will come on horseback looking for her. If he catches her, he'll kill her for trying to leave him. Have a heart. You know I'll be grateful."

It made Tarin feel sick. The anger started low in his stomach at the idea that anyone would touch her when he couldn't. He wanted to draw his sword, wanted to feel it bite into the other man and it was only the thought that he didn't have a single right to approve or disapprove of the company Ana kept that stilled him. He wasn't a fool, he didn't for one moment believe she'd denied herself the company of other men since they'd met, but it had never been so openly clear for him to see as it was in that moment.

"Okay, okay, but be quick about it." He moved to the side door and produced a key from his pocket. The lock turned with well-oiled movement. "I'll be back in a moment to lock it, see to it you all are gone." He looked to where Tarin stood, a dim shape in the shadows before ducking back inside the small guardhouse.

"Hurry, he means it too." Ana motioned for them to come over.

The feral woman didn't move toward the door; instead she turned to Tarin. "I don't know why you helped me but know I owe you a debt and my people will know of your kindness."

When she did move, she slipped out the gate house door and into the night beyond with swift movements. Before Ana could shut the door behind her the woman was out of sight, blending into the darkness. "Come, we have to get out of here too." She didn't ask again why he did what he did. In fact, she didn't speak at all as they made their way past the slowly waking city back to the building they both lived in.

"So," Ana began as they entered the courtyard of the building, "what's your plan for today?"

"I need to get in some practice now, sleep a little, tie up some loose ends and then I'll head over to see Shelee before doing this job." He wondered briefly how Danni was going to spend the day.

"When, when will you be working?" The worry was already knotted up in her stomach.

"I'm not sure, most likely just after dinner."

"Well, good luck. I'm sure you don't need it, you're the best in the city."

He shook his head automatically. "That's Vask."

Ana smiled; she knew better. A lot of people knew better but stayed respectfully silent. "Good night, Tarin."

"Good night, Ana. Thank you again."

She watched from the shadows as he climbed the stairs to his rooms. There was something odd about how he was carrying himself, his shoulders too weighted down, his head slightly bowed, and it was growing more pronounced the closer this job came. It worried her. She'd never been worried about any of his hires before; now she felt helpless and far too alone.

Dunn had left a lamp burning and it warmed the large, open room with its golden glow. The man himself had lain down across the bed, still fully dressed down to his boots which he had carefully draped over the edge of the bed so as to not dirty the bedding. Tarin stopped at the entrance of his rooms and took it all in: his former commanding officer and now confidant sleeping peacefully but not resting until he returned, the light left burning and the tea sitting cool in its pot.

For the first time since he'd gained his freedom he'd come home knowing someone would be waiting. It was an unusual experience and he wondered briefly if this was what it was like for other people. He was careful to shut the door as quietly as he could but the sound of the latch woke Dunn up.

He sat up and stretched. "What time is it?"

"Close to dawn. Go back to sleep, I'll try to be quiet."

"Is everything all right?"

"It's fine. I need to get in a practice. Try to sleep." Tarin unbuckled his sword belt as Dunn nodded agreement and lay back down. It wasn't a matter of habit or a need to sharpen his skills that set Tarin to selecting one of his slightly heavier blades from their rack. He was too awake now from his nap to sleep. His mind would race and go over everything it knew about Danni anyway so he might as well play it out. It was his way to practice late at night or early in the morning before a fight. It gave him a chance to run different scenarios in his mind with plenty of time to recover before the actual fight. He stretched out a little and called up an image of Danni in his mind, how the boy moved, how he fought, and began to move against the foe his mind had called up.

Dunn didn't sleep. It wasn't the soft shuffling of Tarin's feet as he moved back and forth across the wood floor nor the other man's deeper breathing that kept him awake. He'd never really had a chance to watch the swordsman fight. On ship it was either mechanical practice or all out, to the death, and he'd been too busy to mind the actions of others during both. The younger man moved against his imaginary enemy with a skillful grace. Dunn wasn't a master swordsman by any means but he was good enough to know that the man quietly moving across the open floor was truly great. As he watched and began to be lulled by the steady pattern of movement by the fireplace, Dunn began to think and then to plan.

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Chapter Thirteen

"Mrs. Farntell, may I have a moment?" Tarin peeked around the half opened window at the frail widow sitting in her comfortable chair, knitting.

She smiled at seeing him. "Of course, lad, of course, come on in, you know the way."

Her reception of him had warmed up greatly over the years but he'd continued to limit their contact. It was easier that way and she whispered about him to other gossips, calling him very private and shockingly quiet. She always sat by her cracked open window to catch a breeze and to let the young people she told fortunes to know she was free. Tarin made his way around the cluttered and slightly musty smelling room to settle into a chair across from her. It wasn't just mold the air smelled of but stale, old fashioned perfume, dust and frail age, like brittle parchment. Every space was packed with things: feathers and stones, knitted blankets and empty bird cages, making the elderly lady appear just another odd addition to the collections.

"You look well. Would you care for some tea?" she offered as he settled in.

"No, thank you for offering and you look younger every time I see you!" He smiled warmly and with his best charm.

She fluttered the compliment off and shook her head. "None of your flattery now, boy! What can I do for you? Your rent's not due for another six weeks."

He nodded agreement. "It's the rent I wanted to see you about. Do you remember Li Burka?"

"Middle level swordsman you killed last summer, or was it the summer before last?" She folded her hands over her knitting and mentioned the death as casually as she had mentioned tea.

"Last summer," he confirmed. "After his death people picked over his things for souvenirs. This line of work is unpredictable and I know I don't have much but I don't want something like that happening to me. So, I'd like to pay my rent for the next year, if that's okay with you, and to leave strict instructions about who may or may not come and go from my rooms?"

"What kind of instructions?"

"My uncle, Elorin Dunn, is currently staying with me until he can get settled in the city. If something should happen, I'd like for him to be able to stay for the rest of my term. Also, on the list should be my Aunt, Shelee Morris, but I doubt she'd ever come down here. Finally, I've employed Analeia Grenk to straighten and clean up. I'll be paying her in advance too and I trust her to respect things should I be gone. Other than those three, I'd like none other to handle my estate, little as it is."

"Are you expecting trouble, Mr. Morris?" the ancient lady asked.

"Not at all, but I'm not as young as I was and eventually someone will catch up to me. I want to be prepared." The small pouch he'd kept close to his body now openly appeared in his hand. It was heavy with coins. "Are those terms acceptable to you?"

She was lady enough to only casually glance at the pouch before smiling. "Of course. How wise of you to plan ahead for all eventualities but I can't imagine anyone ever besting you."

"You're kind but occasionally people get lucky." He smiled warmly again as he stood, setting the pouch on the small table by her side. "I'll leave you to your affairs."

It was late afternoon when Ana raced up the steps to Tarin's rooms. Her mother had sent her on errands all morning, buying supplies with the money Tarin had paid her in advance for Analeia's services. Ana hadn't learned where the extra money had come from until she'd returned and as soon as her mother had gossiped about how far in advance Tarin had paid his rent, her blood went cold.

She didn't knock and threw the door open in front of her. Tarin wasn't there. "Mr. Dunn, where is he?" she asked, breathless from fear.

"He's left already. I'm glad you've returned, I need to ask your help. Will you trust me?" He had been getting ready to go out, sitting in the process of pulling on his boots, when Ana had stormed in.

"Mr. Dunn, we have to stop him, he's working a job, he's paid his rent in advance, he's not coming back! I can't stay here, I have to find him!"

He nodded and stood, pulling his years of command about him and spoke in as soothing a voice as he could manage. "I know, but it's not as dire as you think. I know Tarin has a large sum of money saved and I know he's not the sort to place it in a bank owned by some rich hill person. My guess, he has it hidden in here somewhere but I've looked and can't find it. I need some of it and I'm betting you know where he's hidden it."

She licked her lips as she thought it over. "It's to help him?"

"Yes. I need you to trust me."

There wasn't time for a long debate. She weighed all that she thought she knew about the man across from her and all she had learned of him. In the end it was Tarin's own lack of concern over coin that made her mind up. With an indrawn breath she settled her nerves enough to steady her voice. "Only on the condition that I go with you."

"Agreed."

Tarin sat nervously on the edge of the well broken-in chair in Shelee's private parlor. Judith had sent in tea and cakes but he never ate before a job and she never listened when he told her no. Time was growing short but the events of the past few days had prevented him from returning until now.

"I'm sorry for keeping you," Shelee announced almost before she was fully in the room. Her hair was down today and showing some of the dye she used in it to continue to look younger than her age. It curled in too dark strands around her thick neck.

"I've some time. I'm sorry for not coming up sooner, things have been hectic." He rose to his feet from ingrained manners and didn't sit again until after she'd settled.

It was something Shelee noticed: he always fell back on the hill-taught manners when he was distracted or upset. For him it took a conscious thought to not be polite. "Are you ready to know what Eve found out?"

He was already seated so he nodded, still uncertain as to what to think.

"She's yours. I've the mother's number written down but I doubt it would mean anything to you. She's listed as having died in childbirth. The babe was sold two days later to Lord Wintermarch in a private sale. He's had her working with his house staff since she was old enough to be useful but from what Eve found out the girl's healthy and unharmed. It's never been disclosed who fathered her; none of the other slaves even know." She watched his face carefully but his expression didn't change.

"How did you find out so much?"

"You're a man, you've seen Eve. She's prettier than you are and most men will do anything if a big breasted blonde smiles at them. Turns out Lord Wintermarch's staff isn't immune to her charms. She even found out that Wintermarch has written up the papers of sale for the girl and has let it be known to the household that he may be selling her."

A weight settled on Tarin's shoulders and a knot into his stomach. "Then I know what I have to do. Thank you, Shelee, I'll be by tomorrow if I'm able and we'll settle this." He stood, feeling far too old.

"You won't stay, even for a little bit?" She hated this, hated knowing what he was off to do.

"No, I need to take my place and be ready. It'll be okay," he said as he moved toward the door but his accent made the words sound empty.

Shelee wondered if he was trying to convince her or himself.

Ana pulled the door open and found it swung freely on well-oiled hinges. The sun was setting behind her and she was biting her lip in a worried, nervous habit. The inside of the building was much more elegant than the simple and almost humble exterior and every ounce of it breathed of femininity.

A lovely, tall, true blonde-haired woman glided toward her as she was shutting the door. Ana couldn't think of another word other than 'glided,' for how the woman moved couldn't be called walking. She curved and wiggled in places Ana wasn't sure were possible. What was worse was that the woman was stunningly beautiful. Purely blonde hair that hung in well-brushed waves down her back, full breasts and a tiny waist and lovely, warm hazel eyes that made her appear at least somewhat approachable. "Hi, first time here?" the beauty asked in a voice as warm as her eyes.

Ana suddenly felt very plain with her too large mouth and too straight nose. Her hair suddenly felt too dry from being faded in the sun and the color was a mousy shade next to the woman's. She felt short and boyish and every memory of how clumsy she could be suddenly returned. Ana was willing to bet this woman never tripped over the hem of her own skirt. And that thought only served to remind Ana of how plainly she was dressed, one of Mrs. Farntell's hand-knitted shawls about her shoulders to hold off the damp and the same plain bodice and skirt she'd been in all day. The stunning woman was dressed in clothes that made her look half undressed, draped silks and sheer laces. "I'm looking for Miss Shelee Morris," she managed to say without squeaking.

"I'm sorry," the blonde said without her smile wavering, "Miss Morris isn't entertaining company tonight. Can I maybe help you?"

Ana shook her head and looked away hoping to not blush. "No, no, I'm a friend of Tarin Morris, I'm looking for his aunt, it's very important."

The woman's smile suddenly died and an unschooled look of worried fear replaced it for a moment. "Of course, I'm sorry, most people come to the back door. This way."

Ana followed as the woman wiggled her way down a side hallway and for a moment wasn't worried about Tarin; she was busy wondering how anyone could move like that. Then it occurred to her that Tarin thought of this place as a second home. The Pink Pearl had a reputation as having some of the most beautiful women anywhere. Maybe some of his rejection was her. Why would he want her when he could have such stunning beauty? The thought of Tarin in bed with this breathtaking, unreal looking creature made her flush.

The blonde tapped on a door and cracked it open. "Shelee? There's a woman here who says she's a friend of Tarin's and would like to speak to you."

There was a tense moment of silence before the woman inside spoke. "Let her in and leave us."

Ana entered the room and was surprised at how much it felt like a home, a real home. "Miss Morris?" she asked of the heavyset woman sitting in profile, looking toward the fire.

Shelee didn't move. "Don't waste words, girl, is he dead?"

"Not as far as I know. I don't even know when he's to offer the challenge." The words came spilling out as Ana understood what the other woman must have thought.

For a moment Shelee looked ready to collapse in on herself, to deflate into her own bulk. She drew a breath and straightened her spine, turning for the first time to look at the young woman standing at the edge of her parlor. "Well than, who are you and what do you want?"

"I'm Analeia Grenk, I'm a friend of Tarin's, we live next door, I'm his neighbor." She knew she was rambling and bit her own tongue to shut up.

"So, you're Tarin's Ana, he speaks of you. Come sit and tell me what's brought you here." Shelee appraised the other woman as she moved further into the light and was surprised that she was older than Tarin from how she appeared and quite plain. The way Tarin described her, Shelee had thought of her as subtly beautiful but the woman who sat across from her would barely rate the term handsome. It made her rethink her adoptive nephew's feelings toward this woman. He wasn't one to speak kindly of anyone.

"Ma'am, I was sent here by Elorin Dunn, he was Tarin's commanding officer."

Shelee nodded. "I know who he is, what of it?"

Ana had been unprepared for the strength of the woman's personality and she told a brief and edited version of the last few days.

"Figures the boy would stop in here today and mention none of this. I can't imagine what a shock it was to have Dunn dropped into his care."

"There's more, ma'am," Ana said softly and told Shelee about Danni and the coming challenge, all information she'd learned from Dunn that afternoon but none of which seemed to surprise the shrewd-eyed woman across from her.

"Aye, what of it?"

"Dunn feels, and I agree, that if Tarin kills Danni Westinck that it's a blow he may not recover from. That he's not as cold a killer as he wants people to think. Dunn's gone off and hired a surgeon and he's going to take the man to the Glendale estate. He's worried that Tarin may take wounds on his own person in an effort to spare Danni's life. Anyway, the idea is that no matter what happens, Dunn will be right there with a surgeon. When one of them goes down, help will be right on hand. If it's Tarin, we'll be able to do whatever can be done without delay. If it's Danni, maybe we can save him." The words tumbled out, chasing each other to be told.

"And by saving him, saving Tarin."

"Hopefully, yes. Dunn figured you'd do anything to help Tarin and since your place is closest, he's going to bring whichever one goes down here. He says it's bad enough that Tarin's going to kill Glendale in the way he's going to kill him but to add Danni's death on top of it, it might be too much." She folded her hands in her lap. "I wanted to go with them but Dunn didn't think he could sneak three in and said someone needed to come warn you."

"Very true, and I'm glad to have you here, I hate this waiting. I hate that he does this. You're both right, he's not a killer, no matter how well he does his job." Shelee looked the other woman over again and saw some of the strength in her that she was too nervous to fully express and understood a little of what Tarin saw in her. She nodded in approval. "We'll wait together."

Tarin watched all the festivities from a servant's peek hole. The dinner party totaled close to a hundred or more and they'd filed into the ballroom in their fine silks and bright colors. The musicians had been playing before they entered, not wanting their delicate ears to endure silence as the party moved to drinks and dance. The slaves of the house ignored him, as was custom, but they tossed Tarin uncertain looks. They knew who he was and what he had once been.

He watched Danni, how he moved with a confidence beyond his years or experience, following several paces behind Lord Glendale as he mingled about the crowd and how he lurked on the edge of the dance floor while the good Lord danced with his lovely wife. Danni looked out of place in his plain and simply cut clothes and lower city accent. His youthful good looks seemed too wholesome and honest among the cosmetic and false beauty of the wealthy. Tarin watched every move and hated what he was about to do.

Part of what made him so in demand was that he knew when to pick his moment. He waited, watching, as the crowd danced and almost an hour passed before the collared servants began moving among the crowd, passing out cups of punch to those who didn't already have them, preparing for the toast in the birthday boy's honor.

Tarin moved from his spot with a sigh and entered the ballroom as the crowd grew silent for the toast. It only took three steps for the crowd's attention to move from Lord Glendale to the swordsman moving among them. Several faces openly paled as Tarin drew near where they stood and eased as he moved away, a living angel of death called forth to claim one of them.

He was a dozen paces away when the crowd's whispering and stares alerted Lord Glendale and Danni Westinck of his presence. The Lord look annoyed, mistaking Tarin's presence as a change of mind and acceptance of his proposal. Danni visibly looked shocked but quickly schooled his face to stern acceptance.

"Lord Glendale?" Tarin asked as was tradition.

"Yes?" the Lord asked in annoyance, not yet understanding the situation.

"My name is Tarin Morris. I've come to offer you a challenge to the death. Do you stand ready?" Glendale wasn't even armed. Tarin was surprised at that.

Glendale stood shocked as the reality of the situation came home to him. Fortunately he wasn't required to speak. "I stand ready," Danni spoke, moving in front of Lord Glendale smoothly.

The crowd was alive in whispers and tense debate as they moved back, pressing against each other for the best views safely out of the way. It left the two swordsmen alone in the center, the finely polished wood offering a level if somewhat slick open ground to fight upon. "I'm sorry about this Danni, I never wanted this to happen," Tarin said softly to the younger man.

Danni smiled thinly. "I should have seen it but such is the way of things. You don't mind if I make you work for my blood do you?"

Tarin nodded. "I wouldn't wish it any other way. Good luck, Danni." He hadn't missed how the younger man's voice shook with unease.

Both men took their time to find their guard, shaking out limbs and pacing a moment to settle nerves but when they did begin it was to dead silence in the ornate ballroom. They moved in timed motion, advancing and retreating. Tarin let the younger man take the offensive, sticking to strictly defensive moves and watching, learning. No matter how well he planned a fight in his head, his opponent was never like he imagined. Too much of himself went into the foes he imagined. His morning practice hadn't included Danni's almost instant understanding that Tarin's singular tactic of defense was a means of testing and how the boy instinctually changed his timing, his style and movement to make learning his ways more difficult. The differences between his real foes and the ones he'd fought in his mind always thrilled him, sending a tingle of excited energy along his nerves.

They moved as one in a dance of their own that the musicians didn't need to play for. Tarin's world disappeared to the few feet around them, dissolved into movement, melted into breath and sound and for once all the thoughts in his head were silent. Danni moved in high and his blade drew blood on Tarin as he slid by, cutting open a shallow wound on Tarin's left upper arm. He didn't feel it, that would come later if there was a later, but he saw how the boy moved, saw how he left part of his right side exposed twice now in his eagerness to draw blood and Tarin knew he could win.

It all could be over in a matter of moments. He knew now how to move to make the boy open his own guard and he could slip in during that moment and bury his steel into Danni's lungs. It wouldn't be instant but death would be swift. It was right there and Tarin moved from defensive to the first teasing assaults. Danni handled the change with skill and a maturity beyond his age and as Tarin began pressing the attack, forcing Danni to take the defensive side, the boy continued to fight with measured skill and solid pacing, panic far away.

He could be great, Tarin saw it, the foundation was there, Danni could easily be as famous as Vask. All he needed was experience, more time to learn how to trust himself and learn how to read others and the whole city would beg for his attention. His admiration for the boy grew. This could be the person to end it all for him, to take him down. Danni was almost good enough to do it now; in a few years Tarin wasn't sure who would win in a fair fight.

Danni left his right side open again. It was just a small mistake, and Tarin felt the bite of the boy's sword a second time. This time a red line bloomed on his side, shallow but present. The opening in Danni's defenses glowed, demanding to be exploited, Tarin began the thrust that would slide the point into the boy and just couldn't do it. The crowd saw it, they gasped in shocked surprise at how he turned the blow aside. Fortunately for Tarin's reputation Danni managed to bring his own blade up to at least make it appear that he'd deflected the blow. Both

swordsmen knew differently.

They continued, blood flowed on Danni as Tarin slashed a shallow wound along his forearm. Again the boy opened himself up but this time Tarin didn't even attempt to take it. Their dance drew them close for a moment and Danni hissed out between clenched teeth, "Do it!" knowing he couldn't take Tarin and knowing the other man was drawing out the fight.

Danni was winded now but he wasn't afraid any longer. Tarin was relentless. He could see where he was leaving his defenses open. It had been a problem since he was a boy but he failed miserably at changing how he fought. He seemed unable to fill in the holes of his guard. The next time the opening came, Tarin took it.

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Chapter Fourteen

He slid into the boy, pulling his blow as Danni struggled to defend against it. Tarin spun, sliding blade and body tightly around the younger man. He felt more than heard the crowd gasp as he pulled the edge of his blade across the back of the younger man's thighs. Danni cried out in sudden pain and his legs were washed in blood. He collapsed down onto the expensive fine wood floor and writhed in pain, dropping his sword to clutch at the bleeding wounds. The blood began to pool under the younger man.

Tarin stood for a moment and felt like he might become ill. "I'm sorry," he said softly and moved away from the fallen boy back to where Lord Glendale stood watching.

"Lord Glendale?" Tarin asked again, winded and using the moment to catch his breath, his accent matching the fine people around him.

"Yes?" Glendale answered and waited for the ritual words that ended the challenge.

"My name is Tarin Morris. I'm to press you on a challenge to the death. Do you stand ready?" He kept his eyes on the stunned lord and focused on regaining his breath.

Glendale had watched his young honor guard cut down with less shock than he showed now. "Are you mad? You've already killed my honor guard."

"Stand ready, sir," Tarin warned, Danni's blood pooled and dripped from his blade. He'd have to remember to watch for it; it would make the floor slick.

"But, I haven't even a sword. You can't be serious."

"I'm quite serious, sir. Make ready or I will cut you down as you stand." He prayed it wouldn't come to that.

Glendale looked around to his guests and they avoided his eyes; none were willing to step forward and accept the challenge for him. His gaze fell on the cousin of the Governor, a balding middle aged man of plain looks who arched an eyebrow at him.

"May I have a moment to arm myself?" Glendale asked the swordsman when no one spoke for his defense.

Tarin nodded. "Of course, within reason."

Glendale sent for his blade and fussed nervously at his wife. Lady Glendale, looking as coolly lovely as always, offered all the right words of sympathy and concern for her husband's well being. Tarin turned to check on Danni but found the servants had already removed the boy and one was carefully swabbing at the blood pooled on the floor with a damp rag. It was all so neat and tidy, couldn't allow a little death to spoil a perfectly lovely party.

It took only a moment for Glendale's blade to arrive. It was the same lovely and expensive but utterly useless one he'd worn to the Fleecy Sheep the other night. There was sweat on the lord's brow and it only took a glance to see that his fine suit of clothes would so restrict his movements that even if he knew how to use the silly blade in his hand he wouldn't be able to. Glendale looked around once more in quiet desperation but no one spoke or moved to help.

The fear in his eyes made Tarin uneasy. He didn't like this. There was little doubt that the swordsman could disarm and kill Glendale in a very small amount of time. Tarin decided to give the lord something for his honor and not just slaughter him outright. "Ready?" he asked as the man across from him nervously drew his blade; it shined in the warm light of the ballroom.

Lord Glendale nodded. "Yes, I believe so."

The lord's attack was slow and clumsy and like a good teacher of swordsmanship, Tarin countered it with minimal movement. He didn't return it with an attack, the small wounds he'd picked up from his fight with Danni were beginning to ache. Again Lord Glendale pressed the attack, this one more fluid, more certain but it was almost laughable compared to the smooth, deadly elegance of the earlier duel.

Tarin looked up from countering an awkward pass by Lord Glendale and his eyes fell on what could only be the cousin to the Governor. He was a middle aged man, thick about the waist and balding, surrounded by three honor guards dressed in stylish uniforms. Tarin knew him on sight and his blood froze. It was almost enough of a distraction to let Glendale take a chunk out of his hide. If the lord had possessed any skill he would have and had it been Danni he was dueling with, Tarin knew he had been so deeply distracted the younger boy would have killed him. He had to get out of there and he had to get out now.

It was no effort to take control of the fight; Glendale had barely had control when Tarin was doing nothing. The crowd gasped as Tarin turned his full attention and skill to the aging lord and in a heartbeat the blow was delivered. Tarin was skilled, the point of his blade slid in far enough to make the wound fatal but not so far as to pierce anything that would kill him quickly. The lord looked down in stunned shock at the steel in his guts and his fancy blade clattered to the smooth ballroom floor.

"I'm sorry," Tarin said softly as the man collapsed to his knees and slid his weight off of the sword.

There was always a moment of shocked stillness and Tarin moved to leave while that

held. He'd killed the host and he wanted to be gone before the questions began. The crowd parted willingly. The blood sprayed on him, his own dripping, wasn't something they wanted to come in contact with. Tarin moved to leave the way he had come and once back on the servants' side of things found the way blocked by an aging slave. The man was dressed in the uniform of butler and the collar around his throat was elegant and lovely.

"If you would come with me, sir?" he asked gracefully.

Tarin nodded and followed the man back into the house to a small side room lit only with a single lamp. The room was empty and the butler handed Tarin a clean and soft length of toweling without having to be asked. The swordsman gratefully accepted it, wiping the blood from his face and hands as the butler began to speak. Tarin almost enjoyed how the sight of the blood made the other man pale.

"Her Ladyship wishes me to thank you for your services and to offer her apologies for not delivering this message to you in person. She says she will contact you in the next few days to arrange the final payment for your services and to complete your transactions. If you find those terms acceptable." The slave delivered the speech in a careful monotone, his eyes not watching how red the towel was becoming.

Tarin wondered what he thought about the Lady of the house killing the Lord, or if he thought about it at all. "Please tell her those terms are acceptable but I expect to hear word from her within a reasonable length of time."

"Very well sir."

"The other swordsman?" he asked with an uneasy need to know.

"Was taken to be tended, I know nothing of his condition but might I say, sir, it was an honor to see you work." The monotone was gone and pride was in the man's voice.

It disturbed Tarin, he'd never imagined that other slaves thought of him as a thing to be proud of. He'd never been close to the house staff, never belonged anywhere when collared, so the idea they had claimed him now was one that unsettled him. He didn't answer. He handed back the soiled toweling after giving his blade a clean sweep, turned and left the room the way they had come.

Tarin almost walked into one of the Governor's cousin's uniformed guard. The man was tall and strong but his eyes were kind. "Easy," he soothed in a deep voice when Tarin instinctually raised the blade he still carried in his hand. "I'm not here to fight you. His Grace wants a word with you."

"Tell him I'm busy."

The guard shook his head. "It doesn't work that way and you know it. He only wants a word."

It wasn't the guard's fault. Tarin knew if the man had summoned him he had to attend, there was no way he could simply leave while he was under the same roof. He nodded and followed the taller man, feeling suddenly young and helpless. The house was dark but the walk wasn't very far. The guard led him down a hallway and to a small study.

"Thank you," Tarin said instinctually to the guard who opened the door for him but stayed out in the hallway with the other two.

The guard didn't let him pass. "I'll need your sword."

Tarin grinned and handed it over. Both knew that a blade wasn't needed to kill, it was merely a formality. "Finish cleaning it for me, would you?" he teased, using his accent to mock and the not very subtle blood on the blade to remind the men outside of just who he was.

Without a word they let him pass and shut the door behind him leaving Tarin alone in the cozy room but for Lord Harnswell, the Governor's cousin. He leaned against a table and a bowl was beside him filled with gold crowns. The Governor had fourteen cousins; it was poor luck the one attending Glendale's birthday bash was one Tarin had run into before.

"Hello, lovely," the man said smoothly, not moving, letting Tarin pace into the room. "I'd heard you were up to this whole swordsman thing. How delightful to see it first hand. You're bleeding."

Tarin didn't answer and moved to within a few paces of the other man, wanting to run but refusing to back down to anyone. "You're observant," he mocked back, knowing no one dared speak to this man in any but the most accommodating tones. Tarin had nothing to fear from him and he kept repeating that to himself over and over.

The man laughed warmly. "You do remember me, but not, maybe my name, no matter. The name you have now suits you. I can't recall what we called you then but that doesn't matter either."

"Lord Harnswell," Tarin answered bitterly.

"Very good, very good indeed. You should let my surgeon tend those wounds, you're bleeding all over the soon-to-be-widow's rugs."

"I'm fine. What do you want of me."

Harnswell let his hand dip into the bowl of coins. "There's two hundred crowns here and they're yours. Spend the night with me."

Tarin felt his blood go cold. "You don't need a sword, you've three outside the door."

"Come now, we both know you're too clever to truly misunderstand my meaning. You were the best, the most beautiful, I've never known anyone like you and you sell your sword. It's absurd." He dropped a pouch into the bowl. "Three hundred and you don't have to stay until dawn." He pushed off the table and paced to where Tarin stood and made his offer more direct. "It'll be pleasant for you."

The fear was ingrained and instant, it made his knees feel weak and his head a little light. Tarin drew a breath. It steadied him so when he spoke none of his fear was in his voice. "Remove your hand or I will break your fingers."

Harnswell took it for a joke until he saw the younger man's eyes. Standing there, wounded and with his odd, exquisite eyes glowing in threat and hate he knew it wasn't an idle tease and he suddenly had no doubt the swordsmen would do as he threatened. Harnswell withdrew his hand but stayed standing close. "Four hundred."

Tarin shook his head. "There aren't enough crowns in the colony to make me go to bed with you." His accent was high and his tone insulting. "The only way someone like you could have me is by force, but then, that's how you had me originally." He didn't wait for an answer but turned to leave.

Harnswell was red faced with anger at the insult and rejection. "You can't speak to me so, I'll--"

"You'll what?" Tarin demanded turning on the aging man. "You'll attack me? Not likely but I'd love to see you try. You'll ruin me? How, you have no control over me any longer. All you are is a nobody who no one would give the time of day to if you weren't a relation of someone who holds real power. You are nothing so don't you ever dare to threaten me!" By the time he finished Tarin was close to screaming the words at the noble. He was shaking when he stormed out of the room. Blind with emotion, he barely noticed the blade handed back to him had been carefully wiped clean.

How he came to be at the public fountain he couldn't quite recall. Lord Glendale's house and the streets around it had blurred together in shock and rage with only the need to put distance between himself and Lord Harnswell driving him. Three honor guards or not, Tarin didn't trust himself to not try to kill the man.

The next thing he knew he was splashing water on his face and scrubbing at the blood trapped in the corners of his fingernails in the fountain's cool water. It was dark now, the night fully settling around the city, and there wasn't anyone to notice him. He wondered about Danni but the idea made him ache with guilt and it wasn't a thought he was ready to explore. He wondered about Glendale. In his mind he imagined the lord suffering, wondering who it was that hired his death and his lovely, viper of a wife tending to him as he slowly died.

It was easier to think about Glendale, even easier to think about Danni, than to think at all about Harnswell. He'd been nothing but a thing to them, something pretty to be possessed and used. They'd stripped him of all humanity; he'd say of all dignity but that implied he'd ever been allowed to have any. They'd taken everything from him, no matter how small or unimportant it was, and left him without so much as a name. Harnswell brought all those memories he'd tried desperately to bury right back to the surface.

He knew he should go see Shelee, knew she'd be worried. He knew he should go tend his wounds; they'd stopped bleeding for the most part but he was a mess. What he did was set out for the Sheep.

The few people he passed as he moved from back street to back street took one look his way and scurried to be away from him. No one desired to anger a swordsman and only a fool would get in the way of one already angry. As he grew closer to the Sheep he had to take more populated streets, passing by whorehouses and gambling halls and the loud music and laughter inside both. Many people noticed his passing, noticed his state and word spread ahead of him about someone having been killed.

They must have been watching for him because the four men were out in the street and away from the gambling hall while Tarin was still a half a block away. They stood with a purpose waiting for him to approach and Tarin drew his sword when he saw the outline of the blades on their hips. The corner was well lit and people began to peer out of shutters or outright join them on the street, tasting something exciting on the air, knowing something was going to happen.

Arkin Harvis stood with his blade drawn, three of his young friends following his example and they stood together waiting for the swordsman to reach them. The growing crowd whispered, hissing like a frantic, oversized snake with gossip and a greedy need for action. The light was

behind Harvis and Tarin was almost on top of them when he saw who it was that had emerged to challenge him.

There was no time wasted on words, no breath spent on empty boasts or bantering, teasing play. Tarin was past that point; he'd given fair warning to the other man and the fool had picked this night of all nights to come for him. He couldn't even bring himself to warn them off, to give them a chance to leave. He wanted them to attack.

Which the three young men did, as a group, hoping greater numbers would stop Tarin or maybe set him off balance to make it easier for Harvis. It might have been from a simple desire to say later they helped take part in bringing him down when Harvis had defeated him. Tarin didn't care and didn't think, he moved.

The first boy attacked ahead of the other two, moving in to slash high, trying to draw Tarin's attention away from the following attacks. Tarin blocked and side stepped the two other boys, swinging his blade in an arch around and catching one boy half turning. The sharp edge of his blade and the momentum of the arc carried Tarin's sword up and with a sickening, cracking sound halfway through the boy's arm. The bones were broken and the arm partly severed. Tarin had little doubt the boy would lose it as he pulled his blade free and let the young, hopeful swordsman fall away in gasping shock.

The remaining two attacked in concert, darting points toward him, slashing almost with skill at the experienced swordsman. Tarin moved fluidly. He moved without thinking, his blade clicking in rapid music against the blades of the young men. The crowd stood silent, awed and still. When the opening came, he didn't hesitate. With a twist he disarmed the one and the edge of his blade slid up across the second. It opened a line from hip to shoulder on the boy and before he could react, Tarin stabbed the point between the man's ribs, puncturing lungs or heart and not caring. The wounded boy gasped in surprise and dropped the blade from his hand, red foam formed on his lips as he staggered back, sliding off of Tarin's blade.

As Tarin turned to the third young swordsman he caught the boy reaching with unease toward where his blade lay. He looked past Tarin to where his one friend lay dieing and the other clutched at an arm that dangled at a sickening angle and changed his mind. He held out his hands and backed slowly away from where his blade lay waiting. When he was several steps away he turned and ran.

That left only Harvis. Tarin found him standing, waiting, watching without emotion with his sword held loosely at the ready. It pleased Tarin that the man had waited and he knew if he was half of what he claimed he'd used the younger men to watch how Tarin fought, watch how he moved and learn from it.

He couldn't have known that none of that mattered. They crossed swords with skill and rage, they moved with grace. Tarin knew from the start that unlike the boys, eager to show all they could do and holding nothing back, Harvis was careful. He moved with balance, used only what he had to and never overextended himself.

In one glorious moment as they shuffled in the night like a pair of street dancers, Tarin knew the other man was better. Harvis had to have more in reserve, more strength, more skill, than he was showing and it would be more than Tarin could counter. The other man would be better, they'd fight for a while and Tarin knew in that instant that he would be the one to make the first fatal mistake. The thought made Tarin soar. It would be over, some pain and then nothing. All of it would be gone, Harnswell and Danni wouldn't matter any longer, there would be no more nightmares, no more memories and Tarin felt free. But he was going to make Harvis earn his blood.

As the fight drew out, the balanced motion of attack and parry grew faster, heavier and more desperate. Both men were being tested and it hadn't been this difficult for Tarin since he'd

come against Vask. He looked to his own reserves of strength and skill and used that to judge Harvis and knew the other would soon defeat him.

Only, as the moment wore on, Harvis didn't pull more out. His movements began to slow, the strength in his arm was less than the moment before and his feet were growing clumsy. There were no reserves in the other man and certainly not to the depth that Tarin still felt within himself. Blood had been drawn on both of them and neither man felt capable of stopping there. When the moment of understanding crystallized, Tarin felt sick knowing Harvis couldn't take him. It wouldn't end here.

The bloodied edge of his sword whipped out faster than Harvis could counter and blood poured from the other man's throat. The slash hadn't been deep enough to sever the other's head but there was no doubt death would come swiftly. Tarin stood on guard, winded and still angry, only now he was angry that the promise in Harvis to end his life had been a lie. He was angry that it would all continue, angry that the other swordsman had given him false hope of release. Tarin stood as the other man dropped his blade and collapsed to the paving stones, clutching desperately at his severed neck.

He remained for a moment, watching the other man die and felt envy before he bent to wipe the majority of the blood onto the now dead young swordsman's cloak. The crowd that had gathered was larger than he remembered and they were all watching him in distant awe and worshipful fear. Tarin felt lightheaded as he stood back up, dizzy as he slid his blade back into its sheath. He surveyed the damage: the now sobbing boy with the ruined arm, the one laying dead and their idol, the greatest swordsman of Farickburn gurgling his last few breaths, his blood pooling around him. Without a word he walked away, continuing to the Sheep.

Next Chapter

Story Home

Home

A Springtime Duel

Chapter Fifteen

The Sheep was unusually subdued when Dunn arrived. Those that sat about were clustered together in small groups, huddled together in friendship against an invisible cold wind. The young woman who had guided Dunn from the Pink Pearl to the nearest bridge and into the coach she'd had waiting led him inside and slipped away as soon as she saw Owen hurrying over.

"I'm glad you could be found so quickly." The large man's voice was etched with worry.

"What's happened?" Dunn asked, not seeing Tarin in the main room.

"Damned if I know. Gossip says he was working a job on the hill tonight, I heard Wintermarch and Glendale and even Harnswell's name tossed around. On his way down here Arkin Harvis and some of his boys jumped him, a lot of people saw it. They say Tarin killed them

all. He showed up here looking like death, bleeding on about dozen spots and didn't seem to notice a one of them, sprayed in blood too. He looked a mess and, well, he wouldn't let anyone help him clean up and he was acting a little mad so I put him in a back room. He's not letting anyone near him and he's been drinking since he arrived." Owen shrugged. "None of his wounds look fatal but they need to be tended. I didn't know what to do so I sent word up to his aunt."

Dunn nodded. "Thanks. I've a coach outside. If I can get him on his feet, will you help me get him out the back and into it?"

"Of course, of course." Owen fussed as he led Dunn down the side hallway to the private room they'd stashed Tarin in.

"How much has he had to drink?" Dunn asked before charging into the room.

Owen snorted. "Plenty, enough so that I didn't want to send one of my people in there. You be careful."

Dunn nodded. "I will, give me a moment."

The room was small but well lit, the table was meant for private dinners or games for a small group, no more than four or six people. Tarin was slumped facing the door, his back to the wall and was toying with his clay cup. The pitcher beside it was nearly drained. Dunn could smell the strong ale from across the room and knew with how little the younger man normally drank. It would only take half the amount he had consumed to have him solidly drunk. Blood was soaked through Tarin's clothes in a dozen places. One wide stain on his stomach instantly was a concern. The swordsman's hands were coated in blood and he'd streaked it everywhere, in lines on the table, smudges on his face. Blood had been tracked all over and a good bit of it was his own.

Dunn sighed. "You're drunk," he said even though Tarin didn't look up.

"And you're very astute," the swordsman replied with such a tone of deep mocking that it was designed to make most people want to kick him in the teeth.

Dunn sighed and knew this wasn't going to be easy.

It had been as difficult as he had imagined but Dunn eventually got the other man back onto his feet and kept him there when the dizziness from blood loss, shock and too much drink nearly dragged him back down. Dunn tossed his cloak, bought new the day before and now risking being ruined with blood stains, over Tarin's shoulders and got him bundled inside. Once he got them moving, the swordsman followed on instinct and allowed himself to be taken out the back and quickly settled into the coach.

The coach driver whistled under his breath and agreed to take them directly to the Pink Pearl, in spite of his normal policy of never crossing a bridge. Dunn was grateful; he hadn't been sure he could get Tarin to walk those last few blocks. The ride was silent, Tarin not moving and Dunn not wishing to disturb him and he was relieved when they finally reached the house and he could guide the younger man out of the coach and inside. He took Tarin in through the kitchen, spooking the skinny mistress there.

"Oh, Tarin!" she exclaimed, moving to help lift some of his weight from Dunn before the other man could wave off the offer of help. "Come on, lad, we'll get you fixed up right."

Tarin looked up for a moment. It was the first time since Dunn had gotten him moving that he seemed to have noticed anything, and he focused on the other woman's face. He didn't speak, only turned his head away from her and continued to let himself be moved about like a rag doll.

Dunn didn't think he could pry the kitchen mistress away from helping. She clung protectively to the younger man and helped him up the steps. It wasn't until the surgeon emerged from the small room they'd set aside for Tarin that she backed away. "If you need anything, you'll call?" she asked with a worried tone.

"Of course, thank you."

The surgeon was an older man, frail looking with wisps of white hair clinging to his head and a well trimmed white mustache. He'd been a naval surgeon for years and had long since retired. He lived with his grand-niece, made a general bother of himself, only occasionally took on jobs and only as it amused him. He was a jovial sort, good natured and tight lipped and he'd been a friend of Dunn's when they'd served together. He had long experience putting people back together and handling any situation thrown his way so the silent and bloodied swordsman didn't even give him pause.

Before Dunn could finish thanking the kitchen mistress, the surgeon had Tarin into the small room. Tarin didn't resist as they undressed him, didn't speak a word as the surgeon washed, treated and stitched back together the numerous small wounds over his body. He didn't react at all until they'd finished and Dunn lowered the lamps in the room and with a hand on the younger's shoulder, eased him into bed. That made him shudder and his eyes squinted tightly shut before he turned his face away.

Ana hadn't moved. Once word of Tarin had arrived from Owen and Dunn had left to claim him, she'd taken back her chair and just sat there in mute silence. Shelee knew it for what it was; she too had sat silent far too many nights worried about Tarin. She'd tried to get the younger woman to take another cup of tea but she'd refused and continued to stare off into the fire.

"He'll survive this, you know," Shelee said at last, not wanting the silence to continue.

Ana forced a smile and nodded. "I know, he's strong." She looked down and then back up at the woman across the room. "Are you, I mean, I know he says you're not really but are you related to him?"

That made Shelee smile but she didn't answer.

Ana looked away and blushed a little. "I just thought, with the hair and how much you do for him, maybe."

"The hair is a dye job, I should let it go lighter but well, people expect it. When I was your age it was as light as yours." Shelee rose and fixed them both tea, knowing that if she spoke the other woman would accept it. "I used to work the docks, did you know that?"

"No, I didn't." Ana had seen first hand how the docks ate women alive. The only ones that survived were the ones that were lucky enough to have positions in the few houses.

"My mother died when I was twelve. I had a baby brother to look after and there weren't a whole lot of choices." The bitterness she'd once felt was gone but the memories were still tender. "Anyway, he died about a year or so later and I started drinking. I was pregnant before I was fifteen. I really did give it a shot but I couldn't do it. I wasn't a good mother, we had nothing," Shelee pressed the cup of tea at the younger woman and was pleased to see she accepted it automatically. "So I sold him."

"Tarin?" Ana asked, cupping the tea in her hands and wondering at all she was being

told.

"No, not him. I'm not sure if I could stand the guilt, knowing what they put him through. No, my boy was plain, boring. I guess most year olds are little lumps. I promised myself the money I got from him I'd save, I'd use it to get out but I'd drunk it all in a few weeks. I stayed that way for another year or so. I turned around and was pushing eighteen and looked twenty eight, still had nothing and I was alone. So I said, something's got to give and I had a choice. I could give in, be dead in an alley somewhere or I could clean up, save some money, maybe buy my son back."

"And did you?"

"No, it took a while to learn how to search for him. When I finally found his number it had him listed as dead of a fever about the same time I was making up my mind to clean up my life."

"I'm sorry."

Shelee waved it off and sipped her tea. "I still would have made a horrid mother." It was a pain she didn't want to linger on. "Anyway, when I found out, it hit me hard. I made it a few blocks from the recorder's office and just broke down, ended up sitting along a building just inside of an ally, crying my eyes out. I couldn't stop and then I looked up and there was this boy. He was beautiful, he didn't look real and at first I thought he was some spirit but I saw he was collared and chained and I knew no spirit would appear that way. That was how I met Tarin.

"He couldn't have been more than six or seven. He was all dressed in fine clothes and his collar was narrow and gold. His owner had been out shopping and showing him off and was inside the store. He'd locked Tarin to the bar outside. He had enough lead on the chain that when he heard crying he could find the source. He looked at me for a moment and then asked if I was hurt in this perfect little upper city accent. I told him no and he stood there puzzled before nodding and saying, don't worry then, it'll get better, you'll be okay." The memory made Shelee smile. "I think if not for that encounter I would have started drinking again but I sat and talked with him, found out who owned him and he even let me copy down his number. I don't think he believed me when I told him I'd find a way to stay in touch with him or when I told him he'd done me a good service cheering me up the way he had. There was such a sadness about him and there was little room for doubt as to his function. I couldn't walk away so I made it my concern to keep track of him. That's what kept me on track, kept me going. Without meaning to, he saved me."

Ana shook her head. "No, you saved yourself. I don't know if I'd have been able to do what you've done, built what you've built."

Shelee shrugged. "Maybe I could have, maybe not. It was always the thought that he was counting on me that kept me going. I'd hear stories, gossip about him and all he was going through but when I'd get a chance to see him he'd just shrug and smile and say he was fine and ask how I was. If he could go on, what right did I have to give up?"

Judith knocked and took a half step into the room. "Mr. Dunn's returned with Tarin. They have him upstairs and are fixing him up. Mr. Dunn says he'll be down as soon as he can."

"Thank you, Judith." Shelee waited until the door shut behind the cook before turning back to Ana. "I did try to buy his freedom. When he came up for public sale I took every coin I'd saved for this place but it still wasn't enough. That was the only time he ever went up for open sale and he begged me not to spend the money. Begged me to forget about him and open my house as I had planned. Near to broke my heart too when he went out of my range but I did as he asked, opened the house. That was about the time he was being sent off to the guard."

"I've tried to be a mother figure to him but, as I'm sure you've learned, he's not the

easiest of men to get close to. I'm pleased to see you're trying. I can see why he's attracted to you."

Ana felt herself blushing at that. "We're just friends."

"Nonsense, he doesn't have any friends."

"A lot of people think very highly of him."

"No doubt, on both sides of the river too, but how many of them does he allow to be close, to be his friend? I wish we could have met sooner. I had no idea you felt so for him in return. He does care for you, a great deal unless I miss my guess, but he's never learned how to accept those feelings. I've known him for most of his life and he still holds me at a distance."

"So it's hopeless?"

"My dear child, nothing is hopeless." Shelee answered with all the warmth of her emotion. "He's just not easy."

Tarin woke up late the following afternoon. His head hurt but it wasn't nearly the hangover he thought he should have given how much ale he'd drunk. He felt like he'd been kicked around and the myriad cuts and bruises brought the night before back. There was no confusion as to where he was; he remembered Dunn fetching him at the Sheep and bringing him to the Pearl.

He'd come close, it had almost ended. A deep grief settled over him at knowing it hadn't, knowing he'd continue now. For long moments he lay in the narrow bed and was too exhausted to move let alone rise and start his day. The idea of just staying there, of laying there forever tempted him and part of him knew if he didn't get up and get moving now he never would.

The groan that escaped him was as much for mental hurts as physical ones. Someone, he could guess who, had laid out clean clothes for him beside the bowl and pitcher of fresh water. He washed and shaved automatically before dressing and finding his way down the back steps. It felt late enough that the house would be open and he didn't want to disturb the careful image Shelee worked so hard to create by staggering into the public parlor.

The private parlor was empty of any of the girls. Ana curled up on the lounge, a blanket thrown over her, asleep. Dunn sat quietly talking with Shelee over tea. They both stopped and fell silent when he joined them. Shelee raised a finger to her lips and pointedly looked to Ana. Tarin waited as both stood and joined him in the hallway.

"She just fell asleep a little while ago, she wouldn't sleep all night." Shelee reached to soothe some of Tarin's hair back but stopped when he flinched away from the contact. "How do you feel?"

He shrugged. "I'm fine, has anyone told Danni's parents?"

"Tarin," Dunn spoke carefully, "Danni's going to be okay."

"What?"

It had taken a stunned moment to have the whole thing explained to him and another for him to reassure Dunn that he wasn't upset about the deception or the use of his money. As soon as that was done he'd excused himself and climbed back up the stairs to see Danni for himself. It was amazing to think the boy was in the room just next door to the one he'd woken up in.

Tarin knocked and entered when Danni called out. He wasn't sure of the reception he

was going to receive but he entered anyway.

Danni smiled when he saw who it was. "Please, come in." Tarin obeyed, shutting the door behind him but he hovered near the foot of the bed. "Jeses sake, sit down will you?"

"Danni, I..."

"Don't, I'm too drugged right now to be nice and if you start saying you're sorry I'll tell you to shut up." His words were slightly slurred and he laid in bed weakly.

"All right, but I am."

"Why? When I saw you walk in I about died of fear. You're the only person I never wanted to go against and in you came. But I didn't back down, I stood up and fought and damned well too I think. I'm surprised you didn't kill me. You easily could have and I still would have died if you hadn't had that friend of yours with the surgeon waiting. Don't think I don't know you've paid for it all." He smiled again and looked even younger than he was. "It might be that awful brew the surgeon's got me drinking but I'm not even the least bit sorry so don't you be!"

"Are you going to be okay?" Tarin knew the answer before he asked, he knew how he'd cut the boy.

"I'll live and they say I'll even walk again, just a little limpy."

"You won't be able to work as a swordsman anymore."

He waved it off. "It's not in me anyway. I did what I set out to do. Lord Glendale sent the second half of the payment to my mother this morning. He's still alive, did you know?"

Tarin nodded. "Will he make it?"

"Gossip says it's just a matter of how long he'll last. I didn't see it. Your friend, Mr. Dunn, he'd already pulled me out."

"How are you hearing any gossip?"

Danni grinned widely and Tarin knew that the medicine the surgeon had him on must have been strong. "Tarin, I'm in a house full of beautiful women. They've all come in to say hello, see if I need anything. I'm in heaven."

"You aren't the least bit angry with me?"

"You could have killed me, had every right. What right do I have being angry with you now? You didn't take off my legs, I won't be totally crippled, I can deal with that. I had a shot at it, I did well for a while. It's not what I wanted to do for the rest of my life anyway."

"You were good, Danni, another year and you would have been great."

That made the boy's eyes tear up for a moment. "Thank you. That means a lot to me."

"I should go, let you rest." He bowed out when the boy insisted he was fine around a yawn. It seemed vaguely obscene that Danni, who was so thrilled to be alive, so accepting of all he'd been given should be crippled while Tarin regretted waking up.

He went back to the parlor but found it empty but for Ana, sitting awake now and waiting. She looked up when the door opened and sprang to her feet. Before he could stop her she had tumbled into his arms, pulling him into a close embrace. She felt him shiver from the contact and

grow tense so she didn't hold on for as long as she would have liked.

"I'm sorry, I know you don't like that. I've been worried about you."

"I'm fine." He tried to make it sound convincing.

"No, you aren't but you're alive which is more than I had feared." Her eyes were glossy and she held herself in noticeable check.

Tarin made the choice he'd never made before. "Come here," he said softly and pulled her back against him. She wrapped her arms around his waist, hurting tender wounds under their bandages, and sobbed. He held on and let her cry until her tears were spent.

Next Chapter

Story Home

Home

A Springtime Duel

Chapter Sixteen

He met Lady Glendale the next morning. He'd sent word of where he could be found and her reply was that she would pick him up in her coach. It didn't matter now who knew she had hired him. In another few days, the entirety of the city would know.

So she rolled to a halt outside of the Pearl with the perfectly uniformed and collared driver on top and the perfectly groomed horses and he climbed stiffly inside. She was as lovely as ever but dressed in somber shades of black and gray, already in mourning for her soon to be deceased husband. Her face held no tears, her eyes showed no signs of crying and if anything she looked happier and more alive than she had ever appeared before.

"Hello again, Mr. Morris," she said warmly, pleasantly.

"Lady Glendale, I hope all is well."

"Quite well, thanks to you. That was a spectacular performance you delivered. That boy my husband hired, was he that good or were you putting on a show? You could have killed him several times but didn't, drawing the fight out longer."

He was slightly surprised that she could see that. It made him wonder at her background. "He is, or was, quite good. He'll never take another hire."

"A friend of yours?"

"I don't have any friends."

That made her laugh. "Well said, but untrue I think. Men like you, people either love you or hate you." She handed over a small pouch. "Your second payment. I saw to it the young man's family was paid as well. It was worth every crown, the whole of the city is twittering about it. They say you killed four people on your way home as well. Busy night."

Tarin weighed it in his hand and it felt right but he opened it and counted out ten crowns before handing them back. "As agreed, he'll live through today yet."

She paused. "But he might live tomorrow as well."

"Or he might not. The ten's a fair price."

"Always a gentleman. Agreed. When would you like to take possession?"

"This afternoon if it can be arranged."

"I'll see to it, first thing."

"Tell me, does he know?"

She smiled and the viper below the beauty showed. "Yes, I told him this morning. He's weakening, I have those loyal to me watching him. There is no worry he will seek revenge and I wanted him to know. I even made sure he knew I wanted him to suffer. I told him while I was administering his medicine. It was delicious."

"Where should we meet Lord Wintermarch?" he asked to cover his repulsion.

"Do you know La Jonice's auction house?"

"Yes."

"Meet him there. He always uses La Jonice's. They'll see to all the paperwork."

He nodded. "If there's nothing further?"

"Not at all, I'm well satisfied. It was a pleasure working with you, Mr. Morris."

There was nothing he could say that would remain in the realm of manners so he forced a small smile and climbed from the coach. It was off and rolling as soon as he was clear.

After noon, Burtro Westinck arrived with a graying and careworn looking woman. She had a dazed and uncertain look in her eyes, the look of one who's had everything suddenly and unexpectedly resolve for the better. Burtro was standing proud with no collar around his neck. He nodded to Tarin as he passed by and said only two words. "Thank you."

Shelee hired a coach. Her bulk had made walking any distance uncomfortable and she could afford the expense. Ana demanded to be included and Dunn agreed to come along after he'd been invited by Tarin. The afternoon had turned into one of clear skies and warm sunshine but the pleasant day didn't touch any of their moods. Talk was soft and tense. Tarin sat silent in thought.

The building that housed La Jonice Auction Services looked like a well-to-do home

except for the lot set aside for parking, the private stables for horses and the long, locked stables in the back yard for the human stock. The coach arrived and they climbed out and Tarin froze.

"I can't," he said softly when Shelee came beside him. "I can't go in there."

She nodded. "It's okay, you don't need to. Wait with the coach, we'll take care of it, won't we, Ana, dear?" She included the other woman and not Dunn on purpose. He caught Shelee's eye and nodded in agreement.

"Thank you." His voice warmed in gratitude.

They stayed by the coach as the women went inside. Tarin paced about in nerves and he kept looking to the door and looking away, both drawn and repulsed by the place. Finally, he spoke. "You weren't ever sold through here were you?" he asked of Dunn, the first time he'd ever asked his commanding officer anything personal about his own time in the collar.

Dunn shook his head. "I wasn't. I was sold through Brooks and Burns. This place was a little too high cost for what I brought."

Tarin snorted. "I broke all records. Have you ever gone back?"

"No, I'm not sure I could but I've never had a reason to."

"What if she doesn't look like me, what if they lied?"

"Then Shelee will bring up charges and she'll have a new girl to work in the kitchens." It was a legitimate fear, one Dunn himself had discussed with Shelee the other afternoon.

"What if I see her mother in her, what if I remember which one it was? Sir, I did some horrible things." There was a desperate need for absolution in the younger man.

As Tarin's commanding officer Dunn'd been privy to the boy's files. He'd seen firsthand the names of his owners and he knew full well who had owned Tarin when he'd been placed into a breeding program. It wasn't a man know for his scruples. He wasn't a clinical or professional breeder, he was a casual one that had enough money to dabble in it with no concern for how he used people up. Tarin had lasted almost seven months in the man's program before being sold as unstable. The notes on his records implied he'd had a complete breakdown. It was his inability to be bred, touched or handled that had led to him being sold a dozen times over the next year and winding up being sent to the guard.

For as much as Dunn wanted to comfort the younger man, as much as he wished he could say the right words to chase the gnawing guilt from his eyes, he knew such peace couldn't be offered. There were no proper or magical words that would make things better. It wasn't in his power to grant peace or forgiveness but it hurt him to deny such raw and open need.

Dunn shook his head. "The fault isn't yours. You're doing what's right by the child now. That's what's important."

There was an instant as Dunn's words washed over him when Tarin looked very young and utterly broken. His lavender eyes echoed a pain he couldn't express and the total shame he carried. As quickly as the openness arrived, it faded and the cold shell he wore returned and he took to nervous pacing once again.

The young swordsman's nervous energy was starting to wear on Dunn when, finally, the front door opened and Lord Wintermarch and his manservant emerged. The coach was his private one. It sat off to the side and close at hand. Before he climbed inside he spared a look to where Tarin hovered by his own, plain, hired coach. He neither smiled nor frowned and looked

more as if he were studying an unusual bug before he swept up inside and was driven away.

The doors opened for a second time and Shelee and Ana emerged. Shelee held a thin chain in one hand and it attached to the collar on a slender child following behind them. Tarin froze. The girl had dark hair, he could see that at the distance, and she wore it long in a single braid down her back. She was dressed in the plain clothes of a house slave and that was all he could tell about her but it was enough to make his heart race.

"Sorry it took so long," Shelee began at once. "We all forgot that she'd need to be named before the paperwork could be finished. I hope you don't mind, we picked one."

Tarin shook his head in mute silence, stunned. There was nothing in the girl's appearance to suggest he wasn't the father. She was lovely, an adorable young girl who would grow into a beautiful woman. Her hair wasn't black but dark brown and her eyes were a hazel green not blue. She hadn't gotten his pale skin either, it was warmer in tone, but her features could have been his. They were well balanced and formed a pleasant face that expressed emotion well.

"Tarin, may I introduce Jolie Morris. Jolie, this is your father."

Tarin was surprised at the name. "Your mother's," he said softly without thought.

Shelee nodded. "I didn't think you'd mind."

"I don't. Hello, Jolie."

She kept her eyes down and spoke softly. "Hello, sir."

It had been earlier agreed that it wasn't good to linger and Tarin repressed his need to have the collar removed from the child instantly. Together they climbed into the coach and set off back to the Pearl. Jolie was surprised to learn she was allowed to ride inside and she sat stiffly uneasy the whole way. Tarin sat watching her, studying her features, wondering what she was thinking and most of all trapped in remembrance.

There was no doubt that the women of the Pearl were waiting for their return as many peeked out of windows when the coach finally rolled to a stop. Shelee gave them a hard look and they quickly melted from sight. They went as one to the parlor and privacy, the chain feeling heavy and cold in Shelee's hand.

Judith was just leaving a tray of tea and cakes when they were entering. "Is this the lass then?" she asked warmly and filled with smiles. "My, no doubt she's yours Tarin, she's as cute as a bug in a rug! Are you hungry my dear? I can have an early dinner sent in."

Jolie stood still and Tarin knew the behavior well. "I'd imagine she was fed. The tea will hold for now, Judith," Shelee answered for the girl.

"Very well, but you just let me know if you change your mind."

"We will, thank you."

"Get that damned thing off of her," Tarin finally demanded, not able to stand the sight of the collar for another moment.

The next hour was a busy one. Eve was called in and they took the child's measurements and traced her feet before she was sent out to buy the girl real clothes and supplies. The collar was removed and discarded, shoved quickly into a sewing basket and covered up so as to not be in sight and constantly reminding Tarin. The small size of the metal circle was disturbing in itself.

Jolie stood silent and accepted it all. Tarin sat silent, watching, unmoving.

When the initial press had ended and all the small, basic things were covered he spoke. "If I might, may I have a moment alone with Jolie?" They were happy to agree and soon Tarin sat alone in the parlor, the girl still standing with her eyes down.

He thought about the little speeches masters had told him, thought about the words and promises that had meant nothing and he found he didn't know what to say. "Raise your head up, look at me." She was slow to obey but did from years of training. "That's the first lesson you'll have to learn: no one free keeps his head bowed. You are to be freed. It takes a day for the paperwork to be processed but you are free. Shelee signed the papers because I can't; I used to wear a collar too. I want you to speak freely. I'm sure you're confused and have a million questions. I know I always did."

She looked at him boldly now but spoke carefully. "Are you really my father?"

"The numbers we wear say so. Were you..." He paused, afraid to ask but knew he had to. "Were you treated well? Were you harmed in any way?"

She shook her head. "Only when I misbehaved. You're the swordsman aren't you?"

He nodded. "You've heard of me?"

"Everyone's heard of you." Her face flashed with a quick smile. "They say you were in the harems but now you're the best swordsman in the city and you kill people everyday. They said you killed five people yesterday."

"I was in the harems and I'm not the best swordsman, that's someone else. I don't kill people everyday only when people annoy me and I only killed three people yesterday."

She looked at him with uncertainty but then broke out in a wide grin, thinking he was teasing her. The smile quickly faded. "Am I to stay here?"

"For a few days. I'll make arrangements for you to go to a girls school."

She nodded with all seriousness. "I'm helpful in the kitchens, Joejo says she's never seen anyone clean as well as I can."

"No, I didn't mean it that way. You'll attend the school, you'll have your own room and your only requirement will be to attend classes and learn. You'll be a student."

Her hand went to her neck, where the collar had been her entire life and it asked the question she didn't know how to phrase.

"You're free now. They'll help you adjust to it. They'll teach you all sorts of things and when you finish your schooling you'll be able to do anything you want. I want you to have choices other than just being someone's wife. They'll be kind to you there." He would have done anything to have been sent to a school at her age.

"But you won't be there."

How could he explain that it wasn't safe for her to be too close to him. She wasn't old enough to really understand. "No, I have to stay here but as soon as you learn to write you can send me letters and I'll send word back." She accepted this as a slave did, knowing that things were beyond her control and not expecting it any other way. "Now, let's see about getting you something to eat, you must be somewhat hungry."

Ana found Tarin in the room they'd put him in. He had disappeared after dinner and she wanted to see him before she headed home. "Mind if I come in?" she asked from the doorway.

He smiled quickly in welcome but was still distant. "Please. How's Jolie?"

"Settling in. Dunn's cooing over her. He's surprisingly good with children."

"Not much difference between kids and babysitting new sailors."

Ana shut the door behind her and settled on the edge of the narrow bed. Tarin had taken the only chair and he sat cleaning and polishing his sword in the lamp light. "I wanted to find you and let you know I have to go back home. Mother's going to kill me. I've not been by in days, didn't even send word. But I must say you look very grim for someone that's had everything work out well. You've everything you could ask for work out just as it should and yet you're sitting here brooding."

"I'm not, not really. It must be nerves. I still don't feel right about any of this."

"Can't stand to leave well enough alone. Let things work out for you for once without looking for the bad all the time." She sighed and knew he was going to sit alone and worry. "I should go. I'll come by tomorrow if mother doesn't lock me up."

Tarin watched her stand to leave and he put his blade on the small table. "Ana." He stood so quickly he nearly tripped over his own feet and before she could open the door he caught her hand. "Don't go."

She looked down to the contact with surprise. "I thought you wanted to be alone?" she whispered. The touch felt like fire along her skin.

He moved so his body blocked the door. His head was lowered and his eyes studied the hand he clasped in his own. His request had come on impulse but the thoughts whirling in his mind weren't to be spoken impulsively. They had to be said with great care and each one would have their own price. "I don't really remember my family," he forced out and the words sounded as if from somewhere else. "My mother drank a lot, she'd beat us, she'd scream all the time. I had an older brother, he promised he'd always look out for me. One day I woke up and he was gone. My mother said he'd died in the night."

Ana watched the deep tension in his shoulders, the way every word had to be forced out and she ached for him. "I'm sorry, I didn't know."

A bitter smile flashed briefly across his face and his eyes darted up to meet hers for a moment. "No one does, I've never told anyone, not even Shelee." He swallowed hard and refused to stop. Something in him knew if he didn't say what he had to now, he never would. "My first owner, for the first few weeks, treated me very well. He doted on me. I was given warm clothes, plenty of food, a soft bed. No one yelled, I wasn't beaten, he used to hold me and tell me how good I was, how special. For those weeks I really felt safe, cared for." His face twisted up with the memory of betrayal and pain and he struggled to stay calm. "And then it wasn't safe and I learned what I had to do to pay for the clothes and food and I swore I'd never, never, let anyone hurt me like that again. I believed my brother would protect me and he left me. I believed I was good and I'm not and I'll never do that again." The pain and anger were still very real and he had to release his hold of her hand to cross his arms over his chest which felt too tight and burned.

He forced himself to draw a full breath and forced his shoulders to unknot but he couldn't

bring himself to look Ana in the eyes. "You can't know what I've been, what I've done. I couldn't stand it if you knew. I've never met a woman like you, Ana. I'm not sure there's anything good left in me but I know if you leave tonight there won't be anything good in my life." His words were far too honest and it made him blush, the red flush crept across his face inspired not from embarrassment but from shame.

Ana stood silent, careful of moving or speaking too quickly. Tarin stood in such obvious pain that it made her want to weep for him. She'd never have guessed how deeply lonely and alone he was, isolated even from himself. She'd never dreamed that he'd so carefully invite her to join his isolation or that she'd be so totally taken into his trust.

At length she spoke, softly and as gently as she could manage. "I believe you are good." The words, even spoken with such fragile care, made him flinch in disbelief. "All you ever had to do to have me stay by your side was ask." She caught his uncertain and almost fearful glance up and returned it with a small, comforting smile. "I'll stay by you however you'd like. I'll even do your washing."

That pulled out a startled and very welcome chuckle from the swordsman. His confession had shaken him to the core and he wasn't sure how he'd expected her to react but it wasn't with such strength, such courage or with such secure commitment. "Ana..." She shushed him and pressed her fingertips against his lips before drawing him back into the small room.

The night passed too quickly for the pair, shared with quiet words and soft silences. Ana demanded nothing and bit her lip when she felt too frustrated. It wasn't her way to move slowly for anything but the only way to reach Tarin was to follow his pace. She'd long since made her mind up that he was well worth a little short term frustration. When the words or the touch became too intimate, too close, Tarin would retreat into silence and a few times physically across the room. Unlike that first kiss, Ana knew now to back away and wait, knowing to push forward too fast would drop him into full blown panic. More importantly, she knew now that he'd never once been allowed the luxury of saying stop, slow or wait and that knowledge broke her heart. In spite of how narrow the bed was, when exhaustion pulled Ana down and she lay to sleep, Tarin curled around her. A sign of trust higher than any words he could offer, he fell soundly asleep next to her warmth.

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A Springtime Duel

Chapter Seventeen

Golden warm afternoon sunshine spilled in the small room's window and fell across Tarin's face. He woke suddenly, startled not by nightmare-chased dreams or restless turnings but by the feel of unaccustomed rest and security. They'd curled up to sleep before dawn and he'd slept like the dead, which in spite of his lack of sleep from the past few days and his emotional exhaustion had truly surprised him. He sat up in the sunbeam, his clothes tangled from sleep and their first

uncertain ventures into passion, smelling her on the pillow, still feeling her touch on his skin. He shivered at the memory of how she'd carefully traced the scars he wore and followed each light touch with a lighter kiss. Only this time when his heart beat beat quicker it wasn't from fear.

After washing, tending his wounds and dressing he was almost whistling as he took the steps downstairs on light feet. The clothes he'd pulled on were casual and in his eagerness to find Ana he'd not even bothered about going armed. It took only a quick search of the downstairs to learn that Ana was out, Dunn too, but he found Jolie outside helping Judith in the garden. That had given him a pause as he stared out at the young girl chattering away to the cook. He was surprised that he felt so little shame when he looked at the child and she seemed so happy working beside Judith that he wondered if maybe he should allow her to stay after all. It would make Shelee very happy and she'd asked so little of him. Ana was right, he was sending Jolie away to protect himself from the idea of a family more than to protect the child. As he watched her pulling weeds he wondered if that was fair to the girl.

"She's adorable," Shelee said from where she stood behind him in the doorway. Tarin had heard her heavy footsteps as she'd joined him in the kitchen and wasn't startled when she spoke. "She was up a little after dawn and ready to go. Been helping anyone that would let her. The girls are ready to riot if we send her away." She looked to his profile to try to judge his mood but his face was carefully controlled and his eyes were focused inward. "Join me for some tea?"

He nodded silently and turned from the sight of his daughter and followed Shelee to the back parlor. She poured out the hot brew and made a running, one-sided dialog about how Danni was doing, teasing that the girls were falling almost as hard in love with the fresh-faced, freckled young swordsman as they were with the cute child.

After several sips of tea she finally ventured where she'd wanted to go all along. "I'm surprised Ana spent the night. She was really worried about seeing her mother. You know, you could have had a larger room. If I'd known the two of you were involved I wouldn't have put you in there." It was only from years of experience in controlling her voice and expression that kept her from nearly giggling in joy over the deepening level of their relationship.

"If I'd have known I would have asked." He made a point to study his tea and not to look at the woman across the way. "It was plenty for us. I'm glad she left so early. Her mother must be worried sick by now."

"She really cares for you, Tarin, and she's a good woman, strong, capable."

That made him smile. "You don't need to sell her to me, Shelee, I know how good she is. I care for her too but we're taking it slowly. We agreed last night."

Shelee reached across the table and patted the younger man's hand, some of her delight showing. "Good."

"Now, don't you go getting all fussy about this, it might not become-"

A scream broke off his thought and his words. He looked to the door and the voice called again, screaming for Shelee. Tarin felt his blood chill.

"Judith!" Shelee answered, pushing herself up to her feet.

Tarin was quicker, moving almost at a dead run to the door. "Jolie," he reminded Shelee and the reminder caused his aunt to pale. Some of the girls were hurrying to see what Judith was calling for and he pushed roughly past them and hit the kitchen door at a dead run.

Judith was kneeling in the dirt, blood running down the side of her face and Tarin caught a glimpse of movement going around the side of the house. He chased it, sliding in his haste and

nearly falling as he rounded the corner. Two men had a hold of Jolie, one had a hand over her mouth and the other held her legs. They were carrying her bodily away as she kicked and squirmed, fighting to break free.

"Let her go!" Tarin shouted, demanded, knowing they wouldn't but hoping they'd pause long enough for him to catch up.

They did pause but it wasn't because he'd shouted. Jolie bit the hand over her mouth, drawing blood and causing the man to hiss and pull away with a curse. She fought with renewed strength and the second man hit her, knocking her to the ground before reaching to grab hold of her a second time.

Tarin rushed after them, knowing the extra moment would allow him to catch up. He reached the front of the house and found the way blocked by a third man, a bare blade in his hand. Tarin reached for his own weapon and found it missing. He cursed himself for not putting it on first thing when he woke up, cursed himself for trusting Ana when she'd said over and over things would be okay, cursed himself for wanting to believe.

He moved more carefully, trying to slide around the third man but the fellow shook his head and brought the blade in close. He moved between Tarin and the two others and that was when Tarin saw their goal was a plain coach, standing waiting with the door already open. They were close to loading Jolie inside and he moved again, trying to find a way of getting around the third man.

"Don't," the man warned. "If you force me to kill you, she will die too. He doesn't want her. Word will be sent." There was no threat to the man's voice. It was said in the tone of fact and cold knowledge.

Tarin backed a pace away and wanted to hit something, wanted to kill someone. He watched helplessly as they chucked his daughter into a carriage and the third man climbed inside, the door shutting behind him. The coach took off instantly and Tarin would have followed it on foot but for how madly the coach drove. It soon disappeared into the flow of other traffic. In truth, he didn't need to follow it to have a pretty clear idea of just where it was going.

No one approached him even though several of the women had come outside. Finally, Shelee came over to where he stood, watching down the street where the coach had vanished. "Tarin, come inside, we'll call the guard."

He shook his head. "The guard won't do anything, it's Harnswell." He felt sick and so angry he could scream. All of his reputation for cold detachment was lost, all his efforts to stay in control disappeared. He felt a rage that consumed him, he wanted blood. "How's Judith?" he managed to ask, knowing this wasn't the time to lash out, not yet.

"She'll be okay, come inside," she pleaded and was relieved when he allowed himself to be led back into the house.

The next hour was a swirl of chaos. Eve took over the other girls and the front of the house, freeing Shelee up to worry about family. Judith was tended to and put to bed to rest, under protests from her but she went without too much fuss. Tarin found his knees were weak with cold fear and hate and he sat staring into space, waiting.

"What's happened?" Ana demanded as she swept into the room. "Gossip is flying like wildfire. I came as soon as I'd heard something was wrong."

Shelee knew Tarin wasn't likely to answer. His temper was too close to the surface.

"Someone sent three armed men to kidnap Jolie."

"Word is spreading that someone snatched a child from here but not who she is or who took her, only that it's suspected she was being watched by Tarin." Ana moved into the room and knelt in front of Tarin. "What can I do to help find her?"

"Harnswell took her," Tarin answered and kept his voice steady.

"Lord Harnswell? The Governor's cousin? Why?"

This wasn't the time to hold back. "He approached me after I finished with Glendale. I refused and insulted him."

That she could believe. "Are you sure it was Harnswell that took her? There are many people that would take the chance."

"I remember his guards. It was Harnswell."

She drew a breath and let it out slowly before bouncing back to her feet. "Okay, he's staying over with the Glendale's, said he wanted to stay to help Lady Glendale tend her husband. People have been saying he's either sleeping with her or sticking around for the funeral or both. I can go over there, see what kind of security is in place, maybe see where they have her. We might be able to get her out right away."

"No, it'll be sealed up tighter than a barrel. That's why swordsmen press challenges at parties: not only is it added entertainment but it's about the only time when people can come and go at one of the houses without being stopped." Tarin looked up and pinned her with his eyes. "You are not to go near that house under any circumstances."

"Am I? Since when do you hold my papers? I'll make my own mind up thank you very much!" she protested and folded her arms under her chest but looked away from his eyes. "Lucky for you I happen to agree, for now anyway. We have to move carefully on this. We can't just call the guard, they'll hear who took her and claim she just ran away. Then everyone will know she's your daughter and we can't have that, not yet."

"I don't understand what that would have to do with anything?" Dunn asked as he came into the parlor. "I came as quickly as I heard and Eve caught me in the kitchens and told me what had happened. Tarin, I'm so sorry."

Tarin nodded but it was Ana that answered. "If everyone knows that someone kidnapped Tarin's daughter and got away with it, well, it's a matter of honor and respect. He'll never work again. Who would hire a swordsman that can't even keep his own family safe? It won't matter who took her, she'd have to show up dead and we'd have to see to it word was spread it was random. Or Tarin will have to get her back and kill whoever was behind it which would put him up for murder. Given who Harnswell is no one will look the other way."

"Either case ends badly," Shelee answered and shook her head. "Our best hope is to keep this as quiet as possible."

"What's to keep Harnswell from making it public?" Dunn hadn't understood the weight of Tarin's words that first time at the Sheep he'd told Owen to spread the word that Dunn was family. He'd considered it a courtesy. Now he wondered how that fit to the rules the swordsman lived by. How deep and serious did such a casually spoken statement run?

"He won't. He'd look amazingly foolish and people would laugh at him and he knows it. This is the move of someone powerless and he can't appear that way." Tarin wanted a drink, if only a small one, and knew he couldn't risk it.

"So what do we do?" Dunn felt too edgy to sit and the tea service was cooling on the table. A cup had been knocked over and the contents were left spilled, untouched.

Tarin looked up and raised an eyebrow. "We wait."

Word arrived, hours later and after dinner, the sun setting by the time the young child delivered the folded and sealed letter and scurried off into the night. The letter was brought to the parlor and handed to Shelee.

"It's addressed to you, Tarin."

He shook his head. "Go on and read it, you know I can't read well enough to make it all out."

She broke the seal and scanned the contents. "It says for you to come to the Glendale estate to discuss the terms of the child's safety, that you're to come alone and unarmed and within the hour or the girl will be harmed."

Tarin stood without thinking, ready to go. He hadn't had time to buy a cloak after giving his to the Feral woman. He kept no spare on hand and generally wore out his clothes before buying new ones. So there was nothing to gather to leave. He hadn't armed himself after Jolie had been taken, there'd been no need. No time would be wasted now in disarming himself.

"Where are you going?" Ana bounced to her feet to stand in his way.

"To do what I must. Stay here, all of you, stay here. I'll be back when I can."

"Tarin!" She pleaded with the single word.

Some of the coldness melted from his face. "Stay here. I have to do this alone."

The guards had apologized when they'd bound his hands. Tarin had gone directly to the front door of the Glendale estate and been turned over to the trio. They had searched him skillfully and then roughly bound his hands.

"His Lordship's orders, you're to be bound and tightly." They'd actually been ordered to bind his wrists so tightly the rough rope would draw blood and that's just what they did.

Tarin shrugged. "We all must do our jobs." He kept his tone light and unworried.

The three men exchanged an uneasy look before prodding Tarin along in front of them. The house was in a somber mood. Lord Glendale was in a coma now and breathing shallowly. He wasn't expected to survive the night. The guards led him down hallways and up stairs and finally came to a door toward the back of the house.

One of the guards opened the door. "He's here your Lordship," he said before pushing Tarin inside and shutting the door behind him.

Lord Harnswell sat in a plush chair sipping a brandy and reading from a leather bound book. The display was too casually arranged and Tarin didn't believe it for a moment. He strode into the room and set about to not show any weakness.

"The brat must really be yours for you to come running here so quickly. I was afraid they'd lied to me. Brandy? It's quite good."

"I would but..." Tarin shrugged his shoulders to signal his hands still bound behind his back.

"Ah, well, let's see now." Harnswell poured a second brandy and approached the other man, offering the glass to his lips and letting him sip some of the strong drink. "Can't trust you to be loose just yet. More?"

Tarin sighed and refused. "Southern brandy is so dated, nobody drinks it any longer. The vintage from Carlstrine is much preferred. But then, there's no accounting for taste." He used his most annoying tone and the whole thing was the truth. Tarin kept loose track of what was trendy and stylish. Obviously Lord Harnswell did too for he flushed at the careful mocking of his private tastes.

"Well, I won't offend your palate further."

"Somehow I truly doubt that."

"You go too far. Do you know what I could do?"

"Bore me to death?" Tarin raised an eyebrow and braced for the blow Harnswell delivered. The man was still strong enough that his backhand nearly knocked Tarin to his knees, the side of his face screamed in protest.

"Let's not play any longer, shall we? You obviously care about the girl or you wouldn't be here. She is still quite safe and will remain so, if you agree to my terms." Harnswell sat back down and sipped at his unfashionable brandy.

"I want to see that she's safe."

"Impossible. I'm not stupid enough to keep her here. You have my word as a gentleman she will remain safe, tucked out of the way and untouched. Any harm that comes to her will be as a result of your disobedience."

Tarin didn't smile but it was difficult. It was a clue and one that would help him find Jolie. Every bit of information he gained would help. "What do you want?"

"You, of course. I'd have thought you'd have figured that much out already. They say you're quite bright. This would have been so much easier if you'd given yourself to me that night but she said you wouldn't and you didn't."

"She?"

Harnswell laughed. "Maybe you aren't as bright as they say! No harm in telling you now. So long as we have the girl you won't speak to anyone. Lady Glendale of course. She set this whole thing up. She's a deliciously wicked woman." Harnswell smiled and found telling the swordsman, who now stood looking shocked, too wonderful to stop. "She wanted a land grant

approved by my cousin. Sheep grazing or some such but it needs my approval and support first. I was willing to do the favor on the guarantee that I could have you. So she contacted Lord Wintermarch about that brat of yours. He agreed to sell her on the condition that Lord Glendale died, slowly. They'd been lovers you see, and Lord Glendale had a great deal of damning information about Wintermarch and had planned to use it. Lady Glendale saw to his death and the return of the information. You are here and, well, she'll get her fat, happy sheep. Or was it cattle? I can't remember now but she's set to make a fortune on it. And you danced her jig at every turn."

The news was a surprise and it made Tarin feel lightheaded. It was a distraction he couldn't afford. "And what if I refuse?"

"How can you? If you do I'll personally take the girl as plaything and see if she's as trainable as you were. If that doesn't move you I'll see to it everyone knows the child stolen from your care was your daughter and then you'll be ruined. Really, what I'm asking isn't so bad. It's not like I'm asking you to sell yourself back into a collar in exchange for the girl."

"What are your terms?" He pretended to be surprised by this but in truth he'd known it was coming from the moment he saw who had kidnapped Jolie.

"I only come into town occasionally. While I'm here you will come to me when I send for you and while you are with me you will do as you're told. I may or may not choose to make it publicly known that you are my lover. I haven't decided yet which would please me more. So long as you obey, the child will remain safe and I'll see to it no one knows about our arrangement. Disobey and she suffers and I'll see to it everyone knows." Harnswell stood, set his glass aside and tried to look as strong and commanding as he had when younger. Age was slowly making him feel weak and empty. It was a feeling he didn't like. "Make your choice now."

"What choice do I have?" He tried to look trapped and innocent. It was a look his eyes and coloring played well.

"None, of course." Harnswell smiled and stroked the back of his hand over the purpling bruise on the swordsman's face. "Kneel."

It nearly killed Tarin to obey but he did, awkwardly with his hands still bound but down he went. It was automatic to fall into the position of a slave, toes curled under, knees apart far enough to make the back ache if held for any length of time, his weight balanced over his heels, his head slightly bowed. It sickened him how natural the position felt.

"Very good, I'm pleased some things haven't been forgotten." Harnswell walked to a table and took up a gilded pair of scissors. "This has been bothering me since I saw you again. Hold still, show me how well you mean to obey."

This was a game Tarin knew very well how to play. He held perfectly still but inside he raged. The older man stroked his hair as Ana had the night before but unlike her the touch made him ill. The scissors were sharp but Tarin's hair was thick and it took several sawing cuts to sever the thick tail above the cord he had it tied back with. Harnswell chuckled and tossed the black tail onto the table.

"Ragged but we'll trim it up later. I think I'll have a whip made from that tail. It would amuse me to use it on you. Now, the choice is yours, you have such talented hands I'd hate to keep them tied back all night. Will you behave if I cut you free?" The Lord stood over where the swordsman knelt, running his hands across the handsome man's hair, stroking his neck.

"I'll do as I'm told." It wasn't a lie, for right now he had little choice but to agree.

Harnswell crouched down and took the scissors to the rope, sawing at it in hacking cuts.

The fibers parted painfully slow, the tips of the blades jabbing Tarin in the small of his back and drawing small pricks of blood. Fiber by fiber, the ropes began to give. They were parting and nearly cut before a knock at the door stopped Harnswell.

The guard entered when he was granted leave to do so. "Forgive the interruption. We found a woman in the house." A second guard dragged Ana inside. She was bound as well and pulling against the hands that held her. "She was caught sneaking around. What do you want done?"

Ana had tried to pass herself off as someone who belonged but they hadn't believed her and being caught was one of the most frightening things she'd ever experienced. The only thing worse was being dragged in and seeing Tarin, kneeling as a slave, his hair cut short and his hands bound behind his back. There was blood on his wrists and she knew he already wore rope scars there but he didn't even give her a second glance when he saw who it was.

Harnswell kicked at Tarin, nudging him with his foot. "A friend of yours?"

He shook his head. "I have no friends."

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A Springtime Duel

Chapter Eighteen

"Am I to believe it's chance?"

Tarin raised his head for a moment and then looked to Harnswell, knowing his eyes were trustworthy. "She's my neighbor lady's brat, thinks she's a thief but she couldn't steal bread from a blind man. She must have overheard me speaking and thought to land a big score." He saw the hurt cross her eyes but then the understanding dawned and she held still, trusting him. "Besides, why would I send someone else to search. I know you're too clever to keep the child here."

Harnswell stood and looked between the two. "I don't believe you," he said to Tarin before turning to his guard. "Kill her, leave the body here for now."

Tarin saw the guard draw a blade as clearly as he saw the sudden fear in Ana's eyes. "No!" he shouted, surging to his feet and pulling on the mostly cut ropes with all his strength. Blood poured freely from his wrists and as he bounded to his feet he caught Harnswell's jaw with the top of his head. The lord gasped as his jaw was slammed shut and dropped the scissors in his hand, reflexively reaching to his face as he stumbled backwards and fell to the floor. The ropes tore and gave way, falling, stained with Tarin's blood, next to the scissors.

He moved without thought, scooped up the scissors as the only weapon on hand and turned to the guards. The guard holding Ana kicked the back of her knees and she fell. He grabbed a handful of her hair and Tarin saw the blade move to her throat. She wore an expression of startled disbelief.

Tarin's only thought was to cross the dozen paces and stop the man holding Ana. He

didn't see the first guard until the man had stepped in front of him. The guard's sword was half drawn when Tarin swung the scissors out, slashing a long bloody cut on the man's forearm. The guard stepped back in surprise and his blade slid back into its sheath. Tarin moved fluidly and buried the point of the scissors into the first guard's neck, leaving them there and drawing the man's knife from his belt as he fell away.

The guard stumbled forward, clutching at the scissors as he crashed into the fine wood table holding the out of fashion brandy. Table, guard and brandy fell and spilled over Lord Harnswell where he was struggling to rise. Tarin was already moving to the second guard, knowing the noise would bring the third.

He never actually saw the blade of the guard slide fluidly across Ana's throat. When he turned from the first guard, her blood was already spilling in a shower down onto her chest, the guard's blade red with it. The man dropped his hold on Ana's hair, letting her fall to the carpet, and prepared to meet Tarin's attack.

The rage inside of him felt bottomless and his attack was savage. The blood from his wrists made his grip on the short blade slippery but he moved with deadly quickness. The third guard opened the door to see Lord Harnswell trying to shove the gasping body of the first guard off of his legs. The first guard was still writhing. He'd pulled the scissors out of his neck and blood was spouting in a small fountain onto Harnswell. The girl they'd caught lay bleeding to death and he arrived just in time to see Tarin pull the short blade out from the second guard's ribs. He stabbed the second guard repeatedly and would have continued to stab him had the third man not arrived.

Tarin knew he had to be killed too. It wasn't just a matter of escape now or saving Ana; the third guard knew far too much. The man's eyes grew wide and he turned to flee; Tarin put his blade in his back. The guard fell forward, shutting the door with his weight, crying out. Tarin stabbed again, aiming for the lungs and a third time, before leaving the guard to collapse to the carpet, breathing bloody froth.

Harnswell still struggled with the unconscious and most likely dead guard but it didn't matter now, nothing really mattered now. He went to Ana and scooped her into his arms. She was groggy. "Ana, no, oh no, oh please no, Ana, don't die, don't." He held his hand over the gaping wound on her throat, her blood mixed with his on his hands. "I love you, don't die, please, oh please, don't die!"

She opened her eyes and smiled thinly. One hand came up and touched his face, streaking it with blood. Her eyes were clear and forgiving and so full of love and acceptance that he felt tears streaking his face, washing the bloody touch from his cheek. Then her eyes were empty and one final harsh breath rattled from her body.

There weren't words, it hurt too much. He sobbed in constricted grief and cradled her body to his own. She was limp and still and he cried out in his pain, raising his head up to moan in loss. The world ended in that moment. Nothing before meant anything, nothing yet to come was real and everything dissolved down to the sharp and consuming agony of grief.

Then his eyes fell on Harnswell.

Judith woke as always in the gray, early light of predawn to start the day's bread. She'd been told to rest but that meant sitting and worrying. She could just as easily work and worry. When she tugged the wood door open to bring in extra wood for the oven fire she froze at the sight that greeted her. Tarin sat weakly on the back steps, his head bowed low. His arms rested on his knees and a sword lay near his feet where it had fallen from his numb fingers. Blood coated everything. It sprayed across his face and had soaked into his clothes. Bright red painted the blade, some of it dry and some sharply fresh.

Sitting beside him, left almost as carelessly as the sword, was Jolie. She rose with a cry of relief and rushed into Judith's arms. The girl was untouched and unharmed, her face tear-streaked. The few smears of blood came from her father, not from any wound on her person. Judith tucked the girl under her arm and led her inside where she set the child onto a stool and hurried to rouse Dunn and Shelee.

They approached Tarin carefully and Dunn slid the blade out of reach. Tarin stirred enough to lift his head and his eyes were filled with misery. "She's dead. Shelee, they killed her because of me." That was all he said. It took some effort to get him inside and cleaned up. Once they did, they put him to bed and left him to grieve in private.

It would be that afternoon before word reached them. The upper city was buzzing with it. Lord Harnswell was dead, as well as his guards and a lower city whore. Rumors flew about another man being present but no one knew who to point to. Gossip said that Lord Harnswell had his guards use the woman and they fought over her, killing each other. Then she had killed Harnswell and been killed in turn. That was the story most often told and almost believed but for the quietly mentioned fact that Harnswell had been cut to ribbons. Eve heard it said that he'd been stabbed more times than they could count.

Fast on the news of Harnswell's death were the dual reports of Lady Glendale and Lord Wintermarch. Lady Glendale was found dead in her bedroom, cut with a blade so skillfully that she'd lingered for half the night before dieing. Unable to call out or move, she'd died slowly and alone. Lord Wintermarch was found the same way, his lover killed cleanly beside him. The skill required could only have come from a swordsman and the method used to kill them both was as distinctive as a calling card. There were only two, maybe three, men in the city capable of killing that way and all but one had been publicly busy elsewhere during the night. Tarin's name flew about and bets were placed on who hired him and why they hadn't spoken up yet. It was a stunningly brilliant means of challenge, to break into their very bedrooms. Everyone held their breath to see who had hired it and, more importantly, how much it had cost.

Quietly mentioned and not at all unexpected was the news of Lord Glendale's passing. Everyone agreed it was a mercy he finally found peace. People shook their heads over how his own wife could order such a death. It was said that it was only fitting she should die horribly as well.

Ana was identified by dinnertime and her name quickly became attached to the gossip. The lower city whispered that she'd disappeared for several days only to show up the afternoon before her death. She'd quarreled with her mother and told her that she had a lover and he would take care of her. Then she'd gone off again as suddenly as she'd returned. Only she didn't return again and now never would. It only added fuel to the fire that she was Harnswell's lover and things had gone wrong. Everyone agreed, Ana was stubborn and had a temper.

Tarin stayed in his small room, the pillow still smelling faintly of her, and was too numb to really weep. He came downstairs for dinner but didn't eat. The side of his face was bruised and painful to look at and his hair was raggedly short. He offered no explanation to either and sat still and let Shelee cut it short for him, trimming it to above his collar.

"I need to ask you a favor, sir, it's important." Tarin spoke once Shelee had finished.

"If I can you know I will," Dunn answered, ready for whatever might be asked of him, needing to do something to help.

"Get Jolie south and into a school. If you would, register her as your daughter and if you wouldn't mind, allow her to use your name. I know you can keep her safe and I know you'll pick a good school. I've the money, take it all and go." Tarin's voice was flat and cold.

Dunn nodded. "I can do that. When do you want us to go?"

"First thing. Get her to safety before someone else comes after her. Take as much time as you need. Money isn't a concern, just find her a good place."

The next morning Jolie's chin quivered at being parted from Judith but she was distantly cold to Tarin, frightened of the stranger who was her father. There had been no need to express to her the importance of pretending to be Dunn's child. She'd had a firsthand taste of what it was like to be used as a hostage. When Tarin had stormed in, covered in blood with death in his eyes she wasn't sure if she was being rescued or not. Wintermarch's estate was the only home she'd ever known and being torn from it twice was painful. She promised to write all of her new friends as soon as she learned how to and waved from the coach as it rolled away.

Danni had guessed the truth about Jolie or a good bit of it and had offered his sympathies as well as his sworn word he'd never speak of what he knew. Tarin believed him. Danni knew the importance of family and knew that it would take silence to keep Jolie safe. More than that, Danni had guessed about Ana and the string of murders during the night of her death and both men knew he'd keep that silent as well.

Shelee wanted Tarin to stay longer but that afternoon he left the Pink Pearl, his wrists bandaged now as well and the sleeves of his shirt down to cover them. He couldn't stay. The looks of quiet pity and spoken words of sorrow and sympathy were too much. The city was buzzing with speculation and talk was of nothing else. No one ever really spoke to him outside of

the Pearl so he moved untouched by it all.

His building was wrapped in hushed grief. Weeping could be heard from Mrs. Grenk's window. People came and went and a few of the neighbors tried to speak to Tarin but he brushed past them, unable to gossip and unwilling to speak of such a tender wound.

Dunn had gathered coin and clothes while he was gone but his rooms looked untouched. The empty scrub bucket sat by the fireplace, the brush inside it. Her chair sat empty with no long-legged, graceless sprawling. In that first instant he wanted to leave, wanted to walk out and never return. He was famous now, he could have almost any set of rooms in the lower city he wanted. He didn't have to stay here where the memories were so thick.

But he knew he had to. She'd have cursed him for a fool to do anything that risked his work and life. People would be watching him closely over the next few weeks, looking for abnormalities in his behavior that would speak louder than his words. No one paid their rent a year in advance and then suddenly decide to move. People would talk and it would only be a matter of time before they put the pieces together. There was the matter of the length of black hair in Harnswell's rooms as well as a torn set of ropes. He had to stay. To do anything else was impossible.

But he didn't have to spend time in his rooms now. He gathered a small pouch of coins, twenty five crowns in total and knew what needed to be done. He'd never knocked on the Grenk's door before today. If he'd been any other man he'd have been a regular fixture at their doorway, asking Mrs. Grenk to court Ana, asking to take her to dinner or for a walk but he wasn't like other men. Ana had courted him, approached him as she would an untamed animal and slowly got him used to her presence and company over time, gradually easing her life into his own with no breaks or interruptions until he found now he wasn't sure what life was like without her there.

Mrs. Grenk answered the door. She was red-eyed from weeping. Tarin found himself frozen for a heartbeat in guilty fear. Did she know just by looking at him that Ana's blood was on his hands? Could she see his guilt?

"Yes?" she asked and he saw she had no extraordinary vision.

"I'd like to express my sympathies, Mrs. Grenk." It took an effort but he kept his voice steady.

"Thank you," she said and he saw that she was weary of sympathy too.

"I, you may have heard gossip, I was in the Glendale house as well." It was a dangerous statement but one he needed to say. "I heard the commotion but arrived too late. I found this on her. I knew the guard would take it if they found it." He handed the pouch over. "I know Ana would have wanted you to have it, to take care of things." He knew it was a slip as soon as he said it. He'd never called her Ana in public and never to her mother.

Mrs. Grenk narrowed her eyes but accepted the pouch. She'd long since suspected that the handsome swordsman and her daughter were lovers but now she knew. His eyes were blank with none of their lively watchfulness. His voice was lower than normal and he spoke every word with pronounced care, trying far too hard. It was the Ana that gave him away and they both knew it. Mrs. Grenk nodded in her sudden understanding. "Would you care to come inside, Mr. Morris? It's easier to grieve together." She'd never have invited him if not for that single slip but now she knew he needed to grieve as surely as she did.

He shook his head. "It's kind of you but I won't intrude. Good day, Mrs. Grenk." He bowed his head slightly and backed away. He was down the stairs and out into the street before anyone could stop him.

People stopped talking as he went past, turning to openly stare. He ignored them. It was easy, he was used to it. He went to the Sheep out of habit. It'd been days since he was in and under any other circumstances he'd check there first for messages. It was also a safe place to drink and he wanted one desperately. There didn't seem much point or need to stay sober any longer.

Inside the Sheep was unusually full for afternoon and deathly quiet. No music played. People whispered and huddled together in small clumps. What conversation there was died when he walked in and heads turned to stare at him. Tarin understood why instantly.

A half dozen city guardsmen rose from a table and approached him, one blocking the door and the rest forming a loose circle around him. The man with the most braiding on his uniform stepped forward. "Tarin Morris?"

Tarin nodded. "Yes?"

"We need to ask to see your letter of challenge for the deaths of Lady Glendale and Lord Wintermarch."

They'd come for him sooner than he'd expected. The brutality of the deaths had sparked a loud outcry for understanding from the wealthy on the hill and action had been demanded. It didn't matter, Tarin wasn't sure anything would ever matter again. "I can't show you such a letter," he answered smoothly and knew it would be quick. A day or so in a holding cell and then they'd hang him and it would be all over. He wouldn't fight.

"I'll need to ask you to come with us, sir," the man answered respectfully.

Tarin suddenly needed to hear them say it. "What for?"

"For questioning and possible arrest for the murders of Lady Glendale and Lord Wintermarch. Please, Mr. Morris, come with us and we'll clear this up." The man desperately didn't want to have to fight the swordsman. Even with their greater numbers there was no telling what the silent and expectant crowd would do.

"Very well." Tarin nodded and offered his wrists to be bound as was protocol.

"Tarin!" Owen shouted as he stormed into the main room.

"It's okay, Owen," Tarin answered back. The ropes slid about his wrists over fabric and bandage and still drew fresh blood from the raw wounds below. "It's okay."

"No, it's not! Hold there, sir, hold I say!" Owen shouted to the guardsman, pushing his way around people and tables, a piece of paper clutched in his hand. "Sir, I'm the owner of this tavern," Owen explained as the edgy guardsmen reached for their swords. "I look after things. The other night, Tarin left this letter here." Owen was a head taller than the tallest of the guardsmen but he was trying his best to look unassuming and helpful. "You were hitting the ale pretty hard that night, Tarin, I can see why you'd think it was lost."

The guardsman accepted the letter and read over it, every word of it. The whole tavern stood in mute silence, waiting. Tarin looked down to hide the puzzled expression from his eyes and wondered how Owen had forged a letter of challenge, wondered why he'd done it. Finally, the guardsman nodded. "Very well, thank you for cooperating with us, Mr. Morris, and be grateful to the tavern keeper for holding that letter for you. You'll see that it gets filed in the register's office?"

Tarin's wrists were unbound as Owen made the proper noises of agreement, promising the letter would be properly filed. Reassured and with their duty completed, the guard troop left quickly, eager to be on the other side of the river before darkness fell.

"Owen?"

Owen grinned and clutched the letter. He clasped Tarin on the shoulder. "Come, we'll discuss it in private."

Tarin allowed himself to be guided back to one of the private rooms but he stopped Jen as she passed. "Bring me some ale, Jen."

Her smile faded but she nodded and looked to Owen before moving on. Owen led them to a small back room and opened the door. A middle aged man sat there waiting, a box on the table and a drink untouched beside it. He sprang to his feet and hurriedly offered his hand to Tarin. "Mr. Morris, it's a pleasure to finally meet you, sir." There was a pale ring around the man's neck. Until recently he'd worn a collar.

Tarin accepted the overeager hand numbly. "What's going on here?"

"I'm called Dorshin, sir, I haven't a last name yet, I haven't chosen one. I served Lord Glendale since we both were children. He was a good master, a good man but, Mr. Morris, he wasn't overly clever. Maybe you could tell when he came and visited you? His father, the former Lord Glendale, knew his son's faults so he purchased me to help his son and he arranged the marriage to Lady Glendale who was clever enough for three people. Lord Glendale left a standing order that I was to be liberated upon his death and I was." The words tumbled out of the man in a hurried rush, with him barely stopping for breath.

"What's this have to do with anything?"

"Lady Glendale told his lordship what she had done. She wanted him to know why he was dying so slowly. She gloated over it. Before he lost his senses, he begged me to do something about it. We'd down played our relationship to her ladyship. She assumed we were slave and master but Lord Glendale was as close as a brother and he felt the same toward me. She trusted me to tend him, with her own servants watching me as well, but I tricked them too. I wrote up the

letters and used Lord Glendale's seal. One of the last things he ever did was sign the papers. He slipped away shortly after that and I stayed with him while he passed over. I had to wait to find you. I couldn't leave him." Dorshin looked down shyly. "I was all he ever had, really."

"I was the first one to find Lord Harnswell and I saw you leaving her Ladyship's room. I left orders she didn't wish to be disturbed. I arranged things in Lord Harnswell's room to make it appear more as if it was self contained and not connected to her Ladyship's death. By the time they were discovered in the morning there was no one to question about it. He'd left orders no one was to disturb him, that he had an interesting night planned. The other servants told the guard Lord Harnswell's own words but I knew better."

Jen knocked softly and brought in mugs and a pitcher, setting them down on the table and, with a look to Owen, she left quickly. Owen motioned for the men to sit down. Tarin looked as if he might fall over if he didn't sit soon. "Go on, Dorshin, please."

The man nodded. "Lord Glendale's will was carried out, at once - his personal desires not his estate, that will take longer. I was freed and as soon as I was I came here seeking you, Mr. Morris. I've been waiting all this time for you to show up. I know it's a bit late but here."

Tarin accepted the two papers: the one Dorshin still held and the one Owen had shown the guard. He looked at them and nodded, pretending to be able to understand them. "So it's all worked out then?"

"Yes!" He patted the box in front of him. "Everything is in here." He looked to Owen before rising. "Lord Glendale left me a tidy sum. Please forgive me for running off so quickly but my ship leaves with the tide and now that my obligations are finished, I should go. Thank you, Mr. Morris, thank you."

Tarin nodded in answer and watched the eager man almost trip in his energy to leave. For all his testament to feeling that Lord Glendale was his brother, he was elated to be free of him. When the door shut behind the former slave Tarin turned to Owen. "What's going on here?" He offered the papers to Owen who took them up.

"I read them right away and it's a good thing I did. Do you want me to read them to you?"

Tarin nodded and leaned forward, feeling a little ambushed and more than a little confused.

"Mr. Morris, please forgive my breaking of your protocol in my efforts to hire you. You were far too efficient in the carrying out of your last assignment. I have recently learned of a plot to exploit the both of us and we each have been used as pawns. Lord Harnswell is here seeking you. My wife is planning to deliver you into his blackmail in exchange for her own profit in land rights. The means of this treachery is a young girl Lord Wintermarch owns. She is your daughter and he is trading her for my death and the destruction of certain evidence against him. The girl is, as I'm sure you've learned by this time, the means by which Harnswell will control you but he does not operate alone. He was handed this plan by Lady Glendale and Lord Wintermarch. Like you, I am merely a means to an end to their greed and so I wish to hire you. With this you will find two hundred gold crowns and a letter of challenge. I hope you find this a proper sum for what I am asking as I do not seek to have you hung for what I desire. Kill them, make an example of them, see to it no one ever tries something like this again. Be brutal in your skill and let the controversy surrounding such a challenge fall to my head. I'll be dead and it won't matter. I pray this reaches you in time and that you take up a dying man's request. It's signed and sealed by Lord Glendale." Owen set the paper down on the table.

Tarin was silent for a long moment, "Who else knows of this?"

"Only myself and Dorshin who's already on his way out of town. I saw to it he didn't socialize. As you could tell, he babbled like a brook."

"You should have let them take me, Owen." He rubbed his eyes and poured some of the ale from the pitcher into a mug.

"No, I shouldn't have. Look, everyone knows about you and Analeia Grenk. Most everyone here knows she's the reason you killed Harnswell and most likely Wintermarch and Glendale."

He set the mug down. "Oh Jeses, who's everyone?"

"The people that stay here, the ones in the community and they won't talk outside of the community. It's a small group, Tarin. There aren't many real secrets, just what we don't admit to knowing. I don't think there's a one that faults you for what you did even without knowing about your daughter and what Harnswell was really up to. I'll see to it everyone knows you were under

a hire for Lady Glendale and Lord Wintermarch from Lord Glendale on his death bed. No one in the community will believe it, they'll think it was over Analeia's death but they'll support the official version of things. Hell, if this letter hadn't arrived I was going to write one up for you, claim some offense of honor and say I'd hired you. I may not be rich but I have as much right to hire a swordsman as anyone else."

"Owen, it was over Ana. I would have killed them for going after my daughter but not like that, not so soon but when they killed her, I-" His voice broke and he hung his head. "You should have let them take me."

Owen didn't answer. He opened the box on the table and removed the length of black hair and the blood stained rope. There wasn't a fireplace in the small room but there was a small charcoal stove and it burned hotly. He opened the door and tossed in one at a time the personal letter from Glendale, the length of hair and finally the rope. He shut the door to the stove and sat back down, leaving the bags of coin in the box and it was only then that he answered. "Tarin, you did what you had to do. They can't treat us like cattle, animals they can prod around and control on a whim. In time, word will spread of the blackmail, in spite of the official story. It'll be a long time before any of them try that trick again. It had to be done. The problem is, you aren't a killer. Oh, you can kill and do but it's not in you like some of these others. That's what makes you such a good swordsman." Owen hadn't ever seen the younger man looking so broken and it frightened him. A broken swordsman normally got killed awfully fast. "We're all real sorry about Analeia, it wasn't fair. No one will say anything to you but they've all expressed their sympathy."

"Thank you." He remembered the ale and wanted it badly, needed it but when he raised the mug to his lips he found the pitcher only had tea in it. "Owen?"

The tall man shook his head. "I'll not serve you ale here, you'll have to go elsewhere. I'm your friend, Tarin, we all are."

The End

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