

# the king's diamond



a torquere press birthstone  
by Jenna Jones

"Surely you are joking."

Damalepazhur, king of Azhurahad and lord of the seven rivers, faced his supper table with weariness and dismay. It was richly set as ever, with silver cups and plates and an embroidered linen cloth beneath, but the food set upon it was nothing like the fare he was typically served. No roast duck, no figs, no sliced melon, no spices, no honey.

Damalepazhur picked up the loaf of dark, dense bread that would normally grace a peasant's table. "Lukaru, this cannot be the entirety of my supper."

His chamberlain was stoic. "It is simple but hearty. We must make do until a new cook is found, my lord."

"Very well." Damalepazhur sighed. "A new king's cook and a new steward. What a strange day this is." He picked up one of the jewel-like tangerines from its beaten brass bowl and began to peel it with his fingernails, studying Lukaru as he dismissed the servants and shut the chamber door. Tonight was no night for feasting: Damalepazhur had elected to take his supper in his own chambers. "Please join me. When you stand I believe you are waiting to be dismissed."

Lukaru knelt at the other side of the low table, folding his robes under his knees. "Damal," he said, and Damalepazhur smiled at the use of the childhood nickname, "I bought this food today in the market with my own coin. You can eat it without fear."

"I have no doubt I can eat it. However, there are two hundred other people to be fed in this palace--"

"They are being fed by the cook's assistants, my lord." Lukaru took out an eating dagger, sliced the bread, and prepared a bowl of oil and crushed peppercorns to eat with it. "They are in no danger of hunger. Or anything else that might harm them."

"Oh." Damalepazhur did not think often about the running of his palace, beyond saying "yes" or "no" when required. There were other people to balance accounts, hire underlings and be certain there were fresh linens on his bed when he returned from war. "Good. I had not thought of that."

"That is how we were able to track who poisoned the wine, my lord. Only the cook handled that bottle once it was opened."

"Well. As I said. Good. Then it is only I who is going hungry--and you, if you choose to share my meals." He passed over a peeled fruit to Lukaru, who exchanged it for bread and oil.

"I will happily share any meal with you, my lord." There was mischief in Lukaru's eyes as he bit into the bread with strong, white teeth. "I have not eaten this simply since I was a boy."

"Nor have I. Will you make me porridge in the morning as well, Lukaru? I always had porridge for breakfast in the nursery."

"I will do whatever my lord wishes," Lukaru said in a subservient tone, though his eyes said he would obey for other reasons. Damalepazhur smiled back and ate a segment of fruit.

"What did I do?" he asked, and Lukaru sighed. "No. Tell me. Of all the people within these walls, you will always tell me the truth. What did I do? Do I tax them too high?"

"No, my lord."

"Have I waged unnecessary wars?"

"No, my lord."

"Have I commissioned a public work that the priests declared obscene? Have I defiled the temples or mocked the ceremonies?"

"No, no," Lukaru said. "You know you have done none of these things. You are a just king. You are often impulsive, but you are young and this is a hallmark of youth. But you are *king*, my king," he said with emphasis. "And that means there will always be someone who wishes for your death."

Damalepazhur put down his slice of bread. "You are not a comfort to me, Lukaru."

"You have wives for that."

"I prefer you."

"Then will you accept my truth? Your father faced the same trials, and had he not died in battle he would have died of poison or a knife in his ribs. And he was a good man." He poured milk from a clay jar into a silver cup. "Fear for your life will help keep you alive."

Damalepazhur drank. The milk was cool and fresh, such as he had not tasted since he was a boy. Perhaps not having a cook would be a good thing, though he could not send his chamberlain out to the market every day. "I do not wish to live in fear."

"Good. Then live carefully instead." Lukaru drank some milk as well, then said, "There is an additional option."

"I dissolve the kingdom," Damalepazhur said. "You and I leave the city and wander the countryside as beggars. Doesn't that sound attractive to you? It does to me."

"No, my lord," Lukaru said, dry. "I like a roof and a bed. I am talking about a king's diamond."

Damalepazhur stopped smiling and bent his head to pay a great deal of attention to the tangerine peels. "That's a fable."

"So you know the tale? Then you also know there has not been a diamond since your

grandfather's grandfather's time--but the court astrologers believe one has been born in your lifetime, and they believe they know how to locate the child."

"Do you honestly believe I can be protected by a child?"

"Children grow," Lukaru said. "We will find the child, bring it here, and you will have an additional barrier between you and an assassin." He leaned forward, earnest. "They say your grandfather's grandfather's diamond loved him so deeply that when the king died, the diamond threw himself onto the king's funeral pyre, unable to bear living without him. Someone who loved you so much--"

"A child," Damalepazhur said. "I do not believe that story any more than I believe those stars are Leila, mourning her lost love." He pointed out the balcony window to the cluster of stars low on the horizon, said by his people to be the result of a young girl's tears.

"Damal." Lukaru put down his cup and said, "I love you," and Damalepazhur looked up at him, surprised by the seriousness of his tone. "I love you as my king and as my dearest friend. I love you only as a man who has shared your bed could. Three attempts on your life, Damal! Since the new year, three attempts! And still we do not know who has made these plans and how they were so closely executed. It was purely by chance that you were saved in time today."

"I know this." Damalepazhur bowed his head; the death throes of the guard who had drunk the poisoned wine would not soon leave his memory. "I know this, and I love you, Lukaru."

"Very well, then--if it takes a fable to protect you further I will find that fable, I will bring it to you, and I will put it in this place." The other man sounded desperate, and he got to his feet and walked to the opening of the balcony.

Hoping to ease him, Damalepazhur said, "It is only because we are alone that I allow you to turn your back on me," and Lukaru dryly laughed.

"You should not be in this room. This balcony is hard to protect."

"It has been the bedchamber of the king for five generations," Damalepazhur said.

Still Lukaru did not turn. "Perhaps I should place more guards." His hands clasped together behind his back.

Damalepazhur rose from the table and went to him. He embraced him and kissed his neck, and looked over his shoulder beyond the palace gardens and walls, at the distant lights of the city spread beneath them down the mountainside. The city looked peaceful at night, its torches flickering, its limestone walls aglow in the moonlight.

"I would be a poor king if I cowered in this palace," he whispered. "I must go out. I must govern my people. I must fight."

"I know this, my lord. I would not curse you to such a fate. But give me permission to find the child and bring it to you. Please."

"Very well," Damalepazhur said. "Your heart is set on it and I can deny you nothing. Find the child."

"Thank you, my lord." Lukaru turned in his arms and kissed him. Damalepazhur leaned into him--when they had first become lovers he had been little more than a boy, slim and tall, and Lukaru's body had filled him with wonder at the beauty of men. Now he was the one with a deep chest and broad shoulders, and there was softness to Lukaru's belly and a slump in his shoulders. Still, he was Damalepazhur's best beloved, his dearest friend, and the one being he truly trusted in this place.

"Stay with me," he whispered, thrusting his fingers into the hair at Lukaru's temple where he had begun to go gray. "Stay with me tonight."

Lukaru shook his head. "I must speak to the astrologers and write the order of execution. And you should summon one of your wives." Damalepazhur groaned and pulled away from him, and Lukaru said, "You need more children, my lord. A fertile king means a fertile land."

"Yes, yes...I do not like any of my wives, Lukaru. I like you."

Lukaru patted his face and kissed his mouth again. "Yes, but I cannot give you sons. I will come to you soon, Damal. But tonight you should be with one of your wives." He bowed his head, waiting to be dismissed.

"Go," Damalepazhur said, frustrated, and when Lukaru withdrew and sent in the king's personal guard, he ordered them to summon Mikuhuit, his first and oldest wife. She was not given to talking and he was in no mood to endure mindless chatter.

She was even more withdrawn than usual, wearing layers of robes and a veil over her hair as if she expected to be sent from the palace. Her face was pale and her eyes were red, and when Damalepazhur said, "Were you weeping with worry for your king?" she smiled and said, "I was, my lord," and they spoke no more that night.

In the morning the would-be regicides were executed: beheaded, their bodies burned and their ashes scattered on the river.

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While the court astrologers read the signs and searched for the child, barbarians threatened the northern borders of the kingdom, so Damalepazhur traveled north with his armies and generals. His father Themalepazhur, who had been called the hammer of Azhur, had taught all his sons the ways of warfare, and Damalepazhur had no fear of standing in his chariot with his spear in hand. His generals advised him to observe the battles from afar, but Damalepazhur could not; he longed for the dust of battle and the ringing of spears on shields.

"Well did your mother name you shield of Azhur," the generals said around the campfire when the battle was done. "When you fight you are untouchable."

After the dead were counted and buried and the diplomats had met, Damalepazhur received the chieftain of the barbarian tribes in his tent. The man brought offerings of treasure: scented wood and whole spices, sweet perfumes and indigo fabric, and a girl. "My daughter," the chieftain said. "The jewel of my household, my Anaveh--a gift worthy of you, O King."

She had eyes the color of running water, modestly downcast, and hair like copper loops braided round her head. Damalepazhur said, "A most worthy gift. I accept happily."

Damalepazhur married her in the custom of her people, with much feasting and dancing, and sent word to Lukaru to prepare the women's quarters for another wife. On their wedding night he took her carefully, because she was a maiden and he did not wish to fight, and after the initial strangeness of intimacy she accepted him with enthusiasm. She was earthy for one so young and untouched, and he laughed more than he expected. But he supposed that was the difference between a girl brought up in marble halls and a girl brought up on the plains, living in tents and seeing the herds every day.

Anaveh was eager to learn the ways of his people, and picked over her clothing with her handmaidens, chattering about how she should look now that she was a king's wife. Should she leave her hair long, as her people did, or cut it short like Damalepazhur's? Should she wear white linen or blue cotton? Should she leave off her ankle bells and stop hennaing her hands?

"Do as you like," Damalepazhur said. "I would no more change you than I would change the position of the sun."

When they reached the city of Azhurahad many days later, the gates were thrown open and heralds played their trumpets. The streets were strewn with flowers and people waved and cheered from their windows. There was not much treasure to display--not as showy treasure as he had brought from other battles, no gold and gems or strange beasts like leopards and giraffes--but Anaveh, her hair braided and pinned up beneath her veil, her round body in white linen, laughed and accepted flowers and touched babies with her slender fingers, and the people cheered her.

Damalepazhur took her to the temple of Nallalah, the rain goddess, where they burned the sheet stained with Anaveh's maiden's blood and sacrificed doves. He bedecked her with blue gems strung on silver wires to signify she was a king's wife. "This is the women's goddess," he explained to her. "No man is allowed within save to celebrate a marriage."

As he was not permitted to enter the temple of Nallalah, she could not enter the temple of Azhur--and no one but the king could enter the innermost chamber. The temple was built where the seven rivers converged; they flowed together over the cliff and through the city, and then parted again beyond the city walls. The rivers were the people's most ancient gods, their names beloved and chanted in prayer: Bidu, Japa, Tansa, Luka, Sansu, Bosu, Dama.

On the steps of the temple Damalepazhur sacrificed a bull to Azhur, and sent all the procession on to the palace while he entered the innermost chamber alone. He walked through small dark passageways to the center of the temple, where the floor was open to the rivers and water rushed over a broad white stone. He knelt and let the water run over his hands and splashed the water on his face. The mingled waters always tasted sweet, particularly after the stale water of the northern plains. He drank in supplication and recited the traditional prayers of thankfulness for successful battle, for a new wife, for a child, for a few days of rest.

He had first come to this place as a boy of sixteen, grieving for his father killed only days before and terrified of the sudden new responsibility of his kingdom. He had thought he must kill his brothers before they would kill him. He had thought he must banish his father's other wives before they poisoned him or slit his throat. He had thought, *I will be dead before sunrise*.

Lukaru had brought him here, though he had not entered the innermost chamber himself. "It is not for me--it is only for you. Your father found great comfort here. I pray you will as well." Damalepazhur had knelt by the waters, frightened and confused, and finally prayed to the rivers for guidance: *Tell me what to do, tell me how to be a king, tell me my father chose the right man to follow him*. And he had wept for his father, whom he had loved.

Even now he did not know how to explain it, but as a boy and many times since, he had heard the rivers sing. He could not say what words they sang, only that their voices comforted and soothed him, and that when he emerged he knew what sort of king he would be.

He did not slaughter his brothers: he sent some to other kingdoms to learn their ways and keep the peace, some to govern the far provinces, and others to the armies to learn the ways of war from his best generals. He arranged dowries for his sisters, married some of his father's wives to widowed nobles, and arranged for others to return to their own kingdoms if they wished. He married two wives himself: Mikuhuit, because she was not much older than he and he liked her grave countenance and gentle ways, and Komolah, because she begged him not to make her leave the seven rivers.

Mikuhuit had a son by Themalepazhur, a boy of three named Kekalepazhur. Mikuhuit knelt at his feet and begged for him not to be sent away like the others, so Damalepazhur allowed the boy to stay and be brought up in the nursery until he was old enough to desire a vocation. Politics or war: that was the future of the king's sons.

Mikuhuit had not borne him any children; she had conceived once, early on, but lost the child and had not conceived since. He did not fault her for this; Komolah gave him his firstborn son, a boy they named Eliapazhur, the breastplate of Azhur. He knew the rumors flew that he preferred men in his bed, but he felt the people were satisfied. A fertile king meant a fertile land, and as the years went by he gave the land sons and daughters.

And now he had a new wife, a girl with round hips and a merry laugh, and while she was not as dear as Lukaru, he supposed he liked her well enough.

When he was soothed by the waters, Damalepazhur left the temple. He expected only the four soldiers of his personal guard to be waiting for him; instead, there were his guards and the chamberlain's guards and Lukaru, who smiled at the sight of him and stepped down from his chariot.

"You live," Lukaru said and bowed to him.

"I live," Damalepazhur replied and placed his hands on Lukaru's shoulders. They leaned their foreheads together. "I live, the northern borders are safe once more, and I have a wife for you to meet. Have I been a successful king, Lukaru?"

"You are always a successful king," Lukaru said fondly. "I also have someone for you to meet, but it will keep until you have rested. Come, my lord. Let's get you home."

Damalepazhur smiled at him and stepped into his waiting chariot, slapped the reins and led them up the mountain to the palace.

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"I have missed this," Damalepazhur said as he peeled a tangerine with his fingernails. "You and I and a very simple supper...though the camp cooking was fine this time. A lot of lamb and barley."

"I suspected as much," Lukaru said in a mild tone, slicing bread and dipping it in oil. "That is why I thought you would enjoy it one final time."

"One final time?" He sucked juice from his thumb. "What do you mean? You've grown tired of my company? I've only just come home."

Lukaru gave him a patient look before resuming his slicing. "We have found a cook. Her name is Dolma. She is a river woman," he added, glancing up, "so the fare will be simple until she learns more dishes, but I feel she is trustworthy and that is the more important thing."

Damalepazhur nodded. "Very well. You know best." He glanced at the boy who knelt by the door to his chamber, his head bowed. He had come the same time as the food, though Damalepazhur could not recall if he'd brought the food or merely appeared with it. "We have a new page?"

Lukaru got to his feet. "This is the other new person for you to meet. My lord, this is Ketu."

"Ketu," Damalepazhur said, nodding in greeting. "Welcome."

The boy's head bobbed but he did not look up. He wore the white linen tunic and leather shoes of a palace servant, but he had long dark hair that fell in an undecorated braid down his back. Even the humblest palace maid would tie beads into her hair.



"You look like a river boy," Damalepazhur observed. "We have little use for fisherman here."

Now the boy did look up, a quick glance to Lukaru, who smiled and shook his head. "He is not here to fish or to be a page. Ketu is your diamond."

Damalepazhur put down the tangerine he had been eating and looked at the boy again, whose eyes were fixed on the inlaid floor. "My fable, you mean."

The boy's shoulders grew tense.

"Ketu, please look up," Lukaru said, and the boy raised his head. He had a narrow, smooth face, skin the color of toasted almonds, and eyes like shining stars. He had a youth's simple beauty, and Damalepazhur smiled despite himself.

"I thought you said the diamond was a child," he said.

"He is a child. Sixteen summers--the astrologers thought he would be younger but the signs led to him. He was brought up on the banks of Bisu. His mother is our new cook," Lukaru said. "It was the only way they would agree to come; he would not leave her behind and she would not permit him to go alone."

"And the boy's father is in the stables, I suppose," Damalepazhur said and the boy looked down again. "Or perhaps you have put him in the forge. Do you mind that, young Ketu, your father looking after my horses and your mother cooking my meals?"

The boy did not answer though his soft mouth grew thin. Lukaru leaned over and said quietly, "The boy is a child of Azhur," and Damalepazhur looked at him again.

"I see," he said. It made more sense now: a fatherless child looking for a better life for his mother, of course he would say anything to achieve it. He said, "You realize if I die of poisoning both you and your mother will be executed."

"Damal!" Lukaru said, shocked.

The boy spoke in a voice that was low and controlled. "My lord chamberlain, I will not be spoken to this way, even if he is my king."

"You are perfectly right to feel that way," Lukaru said. "Please dismiss him, my lord. He needs his supper."

"You are dismissed," Damalepazhur said, and the boy bowed--his mouth and shoulders still tense--and backed out of the chamber. Lukaru gestured to the guards waiting outside that they were not yet needed, and they shut the door.

"You have forgotten the pride of the river people," Lukaru said. "You cannot speak to them as you would a pig herder. They belong to the gods, not to you."

"I was merely telling him the truth," Damalepazhur protested. "If he was imagining himself in the depths of luxury I owed it to him to be honest."

"You wanted to frighten him."

"I was testing his mettle!"

Lukaru sighed and leaned back on his hands. "Your astrologers read the stars for him," he said wearily. "They followed the signs to that boy, and they questioned his mother on where the stars where and how high the river was the night he was born."

"And?" Damalepazhur said. "She gave all the correct answers, I suppose?"

"Of course she did. The lad is here, is he not? Do you remember--perhaps you don't, you were very young--do you remember the night there was thunder and lightning but no rain, and the olive groves burned?"

"I remember," Damalepazhur said. "I remember the air smelled of fire, and my father carried water in buckets with the other men to save the groves."

"Your father would never send his men somewhere he himself would not go," Lukaru said.

"Nine months later was the night of the comet, the night Ketu was born. That is why his name is shooting star."

Damalepazhur picked up a slice of bread, and then put it down again. "But it's just a story--"

"No," Lukaru said, his patience gone. "It is no story. I believe Azhur knew you would need more protection than soldiers and guards and me, and so provided him for you. Did you see his eyes? Only children of Azhur have eyes like that. Every time I look into his face I see the countenance of Azhur." Damalepazhur had no answer, and Lukaru said, "Your grandfather's grandfather was nearly seventy when he died, Damal. I wish that for you."

"With a diamond who loved him so much he cast himself upon the pyre," Damalepazhur said wearily. "Yes, I know the tale. But it is only a tale. I could toss that boy over my shoulder with one hand."

"There are other kinds of strength than the strength of one's back."

"And you believe this boy possesses that strength? How will a lad protect me from my enemies? I think your wiser decision was to hire his mother as a cook."

"You see things too simply," Lukaru said and his disappointment made Damalepazhur wince. "Your diamond will fight battles for you, yes, if he loves you enough--but he exists to protect you from evil, to bring clarity and goodness to you, to help you see."

"My vision is clear. I can see a gazelle's horns from a thousand paces."

"Again, too simply." He shook his head. "I do not see why you would reject this gift. He is a forthright and honest boy--a good boy, Damal. Even if he were not the diamond he would be worth bringing to your household."

"You like him," Damalepazhur said.

"Yes, I do," Lukaru said. "Even if I have no children of my own, I still feel fatherly sometimes."

Damalepazhur ate a little bread, then said, "Lukaru, why did you never marry?"

Lukaru smiled and took a tangerine. "Because I am only in love once, my lord."

Damalepazhur smiled too, some of the tension in his body easing. "You say that like a rebuke to me. I do not love any of them, not even the new one, though she is young and comely."

"I know, Damal. You do not need to reassure me. But you do need to say you accept your diamond."

Damalepazhur looked away a moment, out at the night sky. "Very well. We will finish this repast and that, I hope, will give him enough time to eat his own and be cosseted by his mother, and then--I suppose I should summon him here again?"

"Better still, go down to the kitchens and fetch him yourself."

"I can't do that!" Damalepazhur said, scandalized. It was one thing to sneak into the kitchens for pastries when he was a boy--a grown man of his dignity would never venture there.

"You can and will," Lukaru said. "You insulted his pride, and the only way to make up for it is to soothe it. I will come with you," he added when Damalepazhur scowled. "And your guards, of course. You should apologize to him and perhaps even to his mother--or at least introduce yourself to her. I believe it will be better if she knows your face rather than you are merely a name and a list of demands. And then," he said, moving around the low table to rub Damalepazhur's shoulders, "you will bring him here and he will sleep at the foot of your bed, and tomorrow we begin training him as a courtier."

Damalepazhur smiled and closed his eyes, then opened them again and said, "If he is to sleep at the foot of my bed that will make things more difficult for us."

"Yes. We will find ways around it." His hand moved into Damalepazhur's hair, fingers moving rhythmically through the thick strands. Damalepazhur reached back to touch his face. "We always have. We always will."

"We should give him plenty of time to eat," Damalepazhur said and turned on his knees.

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Even though the moon was high and sunrise was not far off, torches blazed in the kitchens and assistants and maids scurried about, bearing jars or baskets or folded piles of linens. They all froze at the sight of the king's guards, and when she saw the king, one little maid squeaked like she'd been poked with a pin and fell against the wall, her hands over her mouth.

"Am I so terrifying?" Damalepazhur whispered to Lukaru.

"Yes," Lukaru said. "Try not to let it affect you."

The maids directed them to Dolma, who was inspecting the great storage jars of grain. Ketu was at her side, and he frowned and crossed his arms over his chest at the sight of the king and his entourage. Compared to the frightened eagerness of the rest of the staff, it was a relief.

Dolma bowed her head a moment. She had covered her long hair in accordance with city custom, but she still wore the dark colors of a river woman. She looked soft and round enough to be Ketu's sister rather than his mother, and Damalepazhur thought she must have been barely a woman when the thunder god chose her. "My king. Thank you for taking in myself and my son-- but I believe in the morning we will return to the rivers."

Lukaru cleared his throat and touched Damalepazhur's foot with his own. Damalepazhur tried to convey he knew he should speak with a look to him, and said, "There is no need. I was unsettled by the presence of the diamond and I behaved accordingly."

Ketu did not so much as glance at his mother, but there was hardly a need; his stance was still that of a man on guard, unyielding as the palace walls. He was taller than Damalepazhur had thought, and his arms and legs were corded with tight muscles. He must have worked hard on the rivers; the lives of fishermen were not easy. "My lord chamberlain said I was here to help you."

"Yes," Damalepazhur said. "You are. You are here to guard my life and I am unaccustomed to asking for favors."

Lukaru turned his eyes to the ceiling. Ketu did not uncross his arms from his chest, and Damalepazhur wondered what he was saying wrong.

Dolma bowed her head again. "Thank you, my lord, we shall not trouble you any further," and began pulling out the pins from her hair.

"My good woman," Lukaru began.

"All of his life I have tried to shield my son from mockery," Dolma said in a quiet, firm voice as she took the veil from her hair and left it on one of the tables set aside for making bread. "When your priests came I rejoiced in my heart that his purpose had been revealed to us. I answered your questions honestly and I have hidden nothing from you. But you, my lord chamberlain, you only want my son as a novelty--a distraction to keep my king alive for a little bit longer. My son

will do great good but not where he is held in contempt." She held out her hand to her son, who took it. They both began to walk out of the kitchens.

Lukaru said to Damalepazhur, "Your arrogance will be your downfall," in a low voice and strode after them.

"Please," Damalepazhur said, and all three stopped, the boy's--and Lukaru's--mouths dropping open in surprise as Damalepazhur got down onto his knees. He winced when all his guards and the kitchen servants followed suit. Even Lukaru knelt, but the river folk did not. They bowed to no one--it was their right.

There were more important matters at hand. Damalepazhur held out his hands to the boy in supplication. "Please. You are right. I only want to stay alive a little bit longer. This palace is full of intrigue and secrets. Someone has tried to poison me, to burn me in my bed, to spook my horses that they would throw me and crush me beneath their hooves. I do not dare spend a full night with any of my wives in case she decides to stick a knife in my ribs. I had to execute my last steward and my last cook because they conspired to murder me.

"But still I live, and I believe the gods have further plans for me--but I do not dare mock them with carelessness. My son--my oldest son--is only eight years old, and I would see him be a man.

"The gods have given me the gift of your son," he said desperately as neither of their faces changed. "I was foolish to doubt it. Please. Help me stay alive a little bit longer."

Dolma said softly to her son, "It is your choice."

The boy paused, then released his mother's hand and came to Damalepazhur. "I have made a promise," he said and knelt before him. "I will see it through."

Damalepazhur would have kissed him, he felt so relieved--but he merely held the boy's face and leaned their foreheads together. "Thank you," he said, looking into Ketu's strange, light eyes, and the boy smiled faintly back.

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Damalepazhur woke in the morning at the soft knock on his chamber door, and he sat up, blinking and yawning, as his guards let in a maidservant with his breakfast.

Two breakfasts, he noticed, and looked at the boy's thin back in the pallet at the foot of his bed.

"Should I wake him, my lord?" the maidservant asked timidly as she set the platters on the low table by the balcony.

"Ketu!" Damalepazhur said. "It is morning." He rose from bed and pulled on a loose tunic, amused at how the girl blushed and looked away rather than see the king undressed.

Ketu opened his eyes and frowned at him, then sat up. "My lord, forgive me, I--" He tumbled out of bed and pulled on his own tunic.

"Breakfast," Damalepazhur said, pointing to the table, and the boy knelt, looking abashed. The maidservant smiled at him as she served up their food, and Damalepazhur was distracted for a moment by the way youth connected to youth before he looked down at what she was serving. "What is this?"

"Fish stew with lentils, my lord."

Ketu had already picked up his bowl, but put it down again at Damalepazhur's snort of disapproval. "It is what we eat on the rivers," Ketu said. "Last night's remaining catch, stewed with what is at hand. I believe my mother will be slow to adjust to the bounty of your kitchens."

Damalepazhur picked up a piece of bread and sopped it in the stew, and ate it. "Well," he said when he swallowed, "it's hearty." There was a jug of new beer as well, but Damalepazhur was loathe to uncork it. He had drunk nothing but fresh water from the well or milk from the markets since the last attempt on his life.

Ketu showed no hesitation, however. "May I serve you, my lord?" he said, already pulling out the stopper as he spoke.

"Of course," Damalepazhur said, and wondered if some magic inherent to the boy would cleanse his food of poisons should the need arise. Or would the boy simply die first?

*Faith*, he reminded himself. *Have faith*.

"You may go," Damalepazhur said to the maid, then said, "Wait. Inform the servants that I wish to bathe and shave, and then I will visit the women's quarters. I wish to see my children."

"Yes, my lord," the girl said and withdrew.

"You have no valet," Ketu observed.

"He died." Ketu drank without fear, and Damalepazhur decided to follow his example. The beer was still cold and he drank half the cup before he spoke again. "He served my father and his father before him. The man must have been sixty summers old when he died."

"But you have not found another one."

"No. It is as I told you last night. I trust my personal guards and my lord chamberlain and my generals, and no others."

Ketu ate and drank, his eyes thoughtful. "If I am to be with you from morning to noon and noon to night, as my lord chamberlain said, then perhaps that is something I should learn to do. I

should serve you in all things, my lord."

"You've decided to make yourself indispensable," Damalepazhur observed.

"I was told to be useful." The boy was starting to look tense again.

Damalepazhur sighed. He was prickly as a desert bush, this lad. "You will be useful," he said. "We'll teach you to ride a horse and swing a sword, and whatever else we decide is necessary for you to know. Perhaps we should give you a better name," he added. "One more suitable to a courtier. Ketelopazhur, perhaps--no, that's my brother--"

"I like my name," Ketu said quietly and ate his stew.

"Or Eliapazhur? Though that's one of my sons--we're running out of armor to name people after. Wouldn't you rather be Azhur's chariot--" The boy was smiling at his bowl, and Damalepazhur said, "You find the matter of your name amusing?"

The boy stopped smiling at once. "No, my lord."

Damalepazhur scowled. "If we are to spend every waking moment together then we ought to be honest with one another."

"Very well, my lord. You may begin."

"Remember your place, boy," Damalepazhur growled.

"I do, my lord," Ketu said and helped himself to another piece of bread. "I was smiling because you think I would prefer another name to the one my mother gave me. I know my place, my lord, and that is why I will remain Ketu."

"You are a very strange boy."

"As my lord says." He ate quietly, his eyes downcast, but Damalepazhur thought it had nothing to do with humility and was more to end the conversation. "What am I to do today, my lord, while you're bathing and playing with your children?"

"You may play with my children too," Damalepazhur said. "They'll like you. You're not much older than they. And if you mean to be my valet you will attend me in the bath." He added, "Though I will shave myself. I trust no one with a blade to my throat."

"As my lord says," Ketu repeated softly, frowning.

Damalepazhur put down his bowl, surprised he had already emptied it. He soaked up the remains of the stew with a hunk of bread. "This is Lukaru's idea," he said. "He believes it. He has never stopped mourning my father and would do anything to keep me from meeting his fate. But I-- Lukaru says you are a good boy, and I believe it, but I do not see how you will protect me."

"By being a good boy," Ketu said and rose at the quiet rap on the door. "That will be your water. Allow me, my lord?"

Damalepazhur waved a hand in acquiescence, and watched in amusement as Ketu directed men twice his age or more to bear in the tub and buckets of water. He was obeyed without question, however; he had an air of natural authority, which in Damalepazhur's experience all river people did; but he supposed it was also the magic of the diamond. *They are in awe of him*, Damalepazhur thought.

He supposed he did not have to believe so long as everyone else did. No one would attempt to cross the king's diamond.

Still, Damalepazhur shaved his own cheeks, though he let Ketu hold the polished bronze mirror.

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Ketu was a natural with a spear, which made sense as he'd been handling them since he was a boy. He was more awkward with a sword and shield, though the head of the palace guards said he showed potential once he got over his discomfort with the unfamiliar weapon.

There was little time for weapons training, however; there was much to learn about the palace, and Ketu and Lukaru agreed Ketu should learn it all if he was to be the king's right hand. "My right hand is fully functional," Damalepazhur remarked, but the other two went on making plans and schedules without consulting him. Ketu learned how to stand awaiting orders or serve food like a page, how to kneel at Damalepazhur's side in court and speak when he was permitted, how to conduct himself among dignitaries and nobles.

"Though," Lukaru told Damalepazhur, "he does not need to learn much of courtly ways. Some are born noble even if their lineage is not."

At first the wives did not know what to make of Ketu: he was neither slave, servant nor captive; not a guard and not a half-brother returned from a far country. Only Komolah knew the tale of the diamond, and even after she explained it to the others the wives marveled that Damalepazhur brought Ketu with him to the women's quarters.

Ketu was patient with the children and that went far in winning the hearts of the wives. Ketu listened to the lisping of the very little ones, was not too proud to help the girls with their dolls and to roughhouse with the boys. He and Eliapazhur, Damalepazhur's eldest son, liked to practice swords together, batting at each other with wooden weapons, and Ketu was wise enough to let the younger boy win most of the time. Ketu even tried to coax Kekalepazhur, the king's half brother who was now thirteen and given to sulking in corners, out to play with the others, though with little success. Neither he nor his mother Mikuhuit were much interested in new members of the household.



Before the summer was over, Anaveh announced she was with child, and the court astrologers cast a very favorable chart for the pregnancy. It meant a welcome respite for Damalepazhur; one child a year was enough for him.

"A well-timed matter, my lord," Komolah said to him as they walked in the garden of the women's quarters and watched the children cavort. "People were beginning to talk."

"Oh?" He was in a good mood and wanted to tease her; peace in his household brought peace to his soul, even if Anaveh would insist on special treatment as the newest wife and the latest to breed. "What are they saying?"

"The same stories as always, my lord," Komolah said, casting down her eyes. "Your father had twelve children by the time he was your age."

"My father had more wives." Her tone, even though it was mild and held no reproach, made him scowl. But still, he could not bring himself to summon one of his wives to him more often, even though Anaveh pouted and wheedled. The others were accustomed to his ways and did not try to seduce him, and he hoped Anaveh would listen to them and let him be.

The borders were quiet, the rivers high and the sun bright. If there had been a more peaceful summer in his lifetime, Damalepazhur could not remember it.

One evening as the summer waned, Damalepazhur watched Lukaru light a brazier and Ketu set up a screen before the balcony. He spoke his heart: "I believe the boy has brought us luck."

"We have had many years of plenty, my lord," Lukaru said. "Over a decade."

"Still, perhaps there's some truth to this diamond fable. If Ketu, our good shooting star, has driven out evil from the land, should we not reward him?" He felt expansive and generous, and Ketu's plainness annoyed him. He was no longer a mere river boy, fishing for hours every day--he was the king's diamond. It was time he looked the part. "Come here, Ketu."

"Damal," Lukaru said in tone of soft warning as Ketu came to the king, his expression serious.

Damalepazhur took a thick necklace from his neck and held it up. It was made of gold and set with lapis and cinnabar stones. "This was a gift from the people of Kalal to my father. Some of the finest jewelry in the land is made by Kalali goldsmiths--it's said their smiths take their secrets to the grave if they have not found worthy apprentices in their lifetime. What do you think of it?"

"It is beautiful, my lord," Ketu said dutifully.

Damalepazhur was sprawled on a rug before the brazier, and he shifted closer to where Ketu stood, still holding out the necklace to him. "Tell me what you really feel. Don't merely echo what you believe I wish to hear."

Ketu hesitated only a moment. "It looks uncomfortable and heavy."

"So if I put it on you it will be against your wishes?"

"Yes, my lord."

"But I want you to wear it," Damalepazhur said. "I want to see it on you every day. I wish to see it declare you my most personal and beloved servant."

"Damal," Lukaru said, "I believe you have had too much wine."

"I do not wish to wear it," Ketu said. "It is yours."

Damalepazhur got onto his knees. "Wear it to make me happy."

The boy looked at him, his face serious, and knelt before him and bowed his head. "Just for a little while."

"Just for tonight," Damalepazhur said and draped the necklace about the boy's neck. He had to move Ketu's soft hair out of the way to fasten the clasp, and the skin of his neck was warm under Damalepazhur's fingers. The boy blushed like a maiden when Damalepazhur touched his cheeks. "Just for tonight, you are a prince, shooting star, king's diamond, son of the seven rivers."

Ketu touched the chain and said, "It is heavy."

He did not rise, and Damalepazhur remained on his knees, looking at the boy's cloud-colored eyes and the shine of gold against his skin, his soft mouth and the shadow of his evening beard. His neck looked like it would taste of honey. His lips parted and he licked them, his eyes fixed on the king's. He whispered, "My lord?"

Damalepazhur came to himself and got to his feet. "Go to your mother," he said roughly and picked up his forgotten cup of wine.

"My lord?" Ketu said uncertainly, standing as well, and Lukaru, kneeling by the brazier, looked away from them both.

"Go to your mother. I have Lukaru with me and the guards are outside. Go to your mother tonight. I will see you in the morning." Still the boy hesitated, and Damalepazhur said, "Go now, child."

"Did I do wrong?"

"Go!" Damalepazhur said, nearly throwing his cup at the boy, and Ketu fled, tearing off the necklace as he went.

Damalepazhur threw himself onto his bed and stared at the flames in the brazier. "That child..."

Lukaru said nothing, only holding his hands before the flames.

Damalepazhur sighed heavily, and when that didn't help he said, "Come to bed."

Lukaru rubbed his hands together and then opened them to the flames again. "That child is very beautiful. I'm not surprised you find him intriguing."

"I love you," Damalepazhur said, sitting up. "I love you until my last breath. Now, come to bed."

Lukaru stood and slowly stripped off his robes, removed his bracelets and rings, and stood before Damalepazhur with his hands on his hips. "I am old."

"You are beautiful."

"I will die when you're in your prime."

"Don't say that." He put his hands on Lukaru's hips and pulled him closer. "I command you to live forever."

"As you say, my lord," Lukaru said and fell onto the bed with him.

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Damalepazhur thought he would have to apologize again, but Ketu appeared in the morning with his breakfast and said nothing about the night before, and Damalepazhur put the incident out of his mind enough to start teasing Ketu again before many days had passed. "Which of my wives do you like best, Ketu?" he would say. "Which of my horses would you like to ride? Will you join me in the market today, shooting star?"

Ketu always answered him seriously. "I do not look at your wives, my lord. I do not wish to ride your horses, my lord. I will always join you, my lord," but he looked amused.

Harvest passed, Anaveh grew great with child, and Lukaru suggested that Damalepazhur send his half-brother to Mikuhuit's father's kingdom. "The boy has no place here," he said. "His mother will never let him be a soldier and he has no mind for diplomacy. He cannot stay in the women's quarters forever. He's becoming a man."

"So we palm him off to someone else?" Damalepazhur said, but summoned a scribe to write letters nonetheless.

When Mikuhuit heard this plan her face paled. "You would send him away after all."

"What else would you have me do? I cannot make him into something he is not but perhaps your father can." When her mouth thinned, he said, "Perhaps if you are determined he stay in the city I can send him to Azhur's temple and make him a priest."

"No," Mikuhuit said. "I will not allow that. He's the son of a king, not some merchant's boy with aspirations."

"Then," Damalepazhur said, growing impatient, "I do not know what you want."

She gathered her robes about her and got to her feet. "Does it matter to you, what I want?"

"Of course," he said, but the look she gave him was disbelieving, and he dismissed her with the wave of his hand.

Ketu witnessed this--he was amusing the little ones with a game of string woven around his fingers--and when they were returning to the king's quarters Ketu said, "I would not speak with Mikuhuit without your guards nearby, my lord."

"Why not?"

He hesitated, walking with his head down. "She bears no love for you."

"Why do you say that? The night our former cook and steward tried to poison me she wept--wept! Out of fear for me!"

They had reached his chambers, and Ketu set about helping Damalepazhur take off his robes so he could relax. There was something contemplative in his face as he said, "Are you certain she wept for you, my lord?"

Damalepazhur paused. It had never occurred to him otherwise. "What do you know?"

Ketu folded the outer robe and placed it in a storage chest. "There are many tales told below stairs, my lord. You and your women--you are all observed and discussed by everyone here." At Damalepazhur's look, he shrugged. "People will talk, my lord."

"And they'll talk about me, it would seem."

"Of course. You're the king."

"So tell me," Damalepazhur said, "what are they saying about Mikuhuit?"

The boy concentrated on tying the linen shift about the king's waist. "Only that she was not weeping for you, my lord."

"They're saying a great deal more than that. You promised to be honest with me, shooting star."

Ketu removed the bracelets from Damalepazhur's wrists. "They say that Mikuhuit wept for your steward, my lord."

Damalepazhur held out his hands so Ketu could remove his rings. "She wept for her lover."

"That, I cannot say."

"But you can think. And you do think."

"Palace intrigues, my lord," Ketu began in a deflective manner, but Damalepazhur stopped him.

"You may be innocent but you are nobody's fool. You listen and you observe. If this is what it means to be a diamond then you are doing it beautifully." When the boy ducked his head and blushed, Damalepazhur said, "Tell me what you have heard and what you believe."

"I heard she wept for the steward," Ketu said. "And I believe she bears no love for you. Please, my lord, do not make me say something untrue."

"Never," Damalepazhur said. "But, in the morning, send for a scribe."

"Yes, my lord," Ketu said.

In the morning the scribe came and Damalepazhur sealed the order with his signet ring, and the boy Kekalepazhur was sent south, to his grandfather. Mikuhuit watched the chariots go, her arms wrapped round herself, and when she passed Damalepazhur on the way back from the gates, the look she gave him was as cold as stone.

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Snow fell on the mountaintops and the rivers ran fast and cold, sometimes bearing chunks of ice. Still, the winter was mild in the city, and it seemed to Damalepazhur that the number of people who asked for grain from the royal granaries was a smaller number than years past. Not a one of his governors told him of famine or want, and he could not think of a year since his father died when someone, somewhere, had not gone hungry.

Two of his brothers visited the palace over the course of the winter: one to ask for Damalepazhur's blessing on his first marriage, the other to present his first-born son at the temple of Azhur. He could speak to them as men now, and he found he preferred to speak to them of their families, their lives, than only about his own. He told one, Telemepazhur, about Ketu's advice regarding Mikuhuit, and after some thought Telemepazhur said, "My lord, if your adviser, who lives in your house and knows your people, sees this and warns you of it, then it must be true." That reassured him; Ketu was not given to gossip or rumors, of course, but without any evidence or further warnings Damalepazhur wondered if he'd acted too hastily. Lukaru had agreed to it as well, of course, but Lukaru rarely argued with Ketu on any matter.

If the palace guards taught Ketu to fight and the head of the stables taught him to ride, then it fell to Lukaru to teach Ketu to be other things to Damalepazhur: adviser and companion and cooler head. It was not hard to see that Ketu had picked up the tricks Lukaru had learned over a lifetime to calming his king: a few well-chosen words, a smile, a hand on his shoulder. Ketu, of course, did things his own way: if the king blustered, Ketu was amused; if the king was angry, Ketu was

calm; if the king drank too much and boasted of his horses and gold and lands, Ketu reminded him that all things came from the gods. Damalepazhur thought sometimes Ketu and Lukaru must share stories with each other of how foolish he had been today, but Lukaru continued loving him and Ketu never lost patience, so he supposed it wouldn't be terrible if they did.

On the first day of the fish moon, Anaveh gave birth to a baby girl that they named Nazali, or hope. Anaveh was disappointed: "I wanted to give you a son, my lord," but Damalepazhur was too enchanted with the child to care. His wives he could take or leave, but he adored his children. He presented her proudly at the temple of Nallalah, and saw to it that there was a place in her nursery for the small, nameless household gods of women so that she would always be protected. A fertile king meant a fertile land, everyone said, and no one seemed displeased with the pretty little girl-baby with shining eyes.

"We are blessed," Damalepazhur said to Lukaru one morning. "I have no doubt of it now. This diamond you have found, he has brought us peace and plenty."

Ketu started to speak, but ducked his head again and smiled to himself as he laced up his sandals.

"I think what you mean," Lukaru said, "is that you have brought us peace by defending our borders at any threat, and the gods have given us plenty."

"Yes," Damalepazhur said, "that is exactly what I mean," and allowed himself to be distracted by the boy's long limbs as he adjusted his tunic and tied his belt. "Where do you intend to go today, my boy?"

Ketu pulled back his hair to bind it. "The marketplace, to buy a gift for my mother," he said as he tied the thick, dark locks with a leather strand. He still refused to adorn himself and looked as plain as a shepherd, but no amount of cajoling from Damalepazhur could persuade him to change. "It's my birthday soon, you see."

"Oh, of course." Seventeen years since the comet, Damalepazhur thought with wonder. "You are a dutiful son."

"I hope so, my lord. She mentioned a merchant who sells sugar that tastes of flowers. I thought I'd get her some."

"Do you need money?" He gestured to Lukaru to give him his purse.

"No, my lord, I have some of my own. I will be back by noontide." He bowed his head and Damalepazhur dismissed him. After a moment or two Damalepazhur drifted to the balcony to watch him go--and to see that a plainly-dressed guard, his sword hidden under a cloak, followed at a discreet distance. Those whom the king loved, Damalepazhur knew, were in as great danger as the king himself.

"Seventeen years," Lukaru said from behind him.

"I remember. You woke me up to see it." He looked back at Lukaru and smiled at him. "You said I might never see such a thing again."

"Yes," Lukaru said, "and you have not."

"Haven't I?" Damalepazhur said. "I have seen many wonders in my years." He turned to the balcony again, where Ketu was a distant figure at the edge of the garden and would soon disappear through the gate. "I wonder that she named him shooting star. Wouldn't she fear he would burn out?"

Lukaru came to him and put his hands on his shoulders. Damalepazhur leaned back against him, watching as the gatekeeper let out the boy--and again the guard behind him.

Lukaru said softly, "What do you fear, Damal?"

"Being left," Damalepazhur murmured. "Being left behind."

"We will never leave you." Lukaru's arms tightened around him and Damalepazhur smiled.

"You gave up your life for me. To be my teacher and to be my friend--you gave up so much."

"I object, my lord," Lukaru said with humor in his tone. "I did not give up my life. I'm quite alive and I enjoy it every day." He brushed his hand over Damalepazhur's hair. "I would give up my life if you asked, my lord."

"I won't ask. I will never ask." He took Lukaru's hand, weaving their fingers together and pressing Lukaru's hand to his chest. "I want to give him a feast."

Lukaru chuckled. "For his birthday."

"Yes. And his mother should have a place of honor."

"When she's done cooking," Lukaru said.

"She has assistants. They will cook. She can supervise, and sit back as is her due. I want to celebrate the comet and my shooting star." He squeezed Lukaru's fingers. "You will sit at my right hand."

"Very well, my lord." He sounded like an indulgent father. "I'll make the orders."

"Don't spoil his gift." Damalepazhur rubbed his hand and let it go. "Begone, my friend."

"Yes, my lord," Lukaru said, bowed his head and left. Damalepazhur turned back to the window. He could no longer see Ketu; the boy would be far beyond the walls now, down the road that led to the city.

Reluctantly Damalepazhur pulled himself away and went to his waiting guards, to escort him to his receiving room so he could speak to today's group of ambassadors.

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Dolma agreed with the plan to honor Ketu, and so when the day of the comet arrived the great dining hall was set for a feast. Footmen lit oil lamps and set out long, low tables that were piled high with food and drink. Guests lounged on comfortable cushions and drank wine from silver cups. Dolma was learning the ways of courtly food, but for Ketu she chose much plainer fare: roast duck and fish, cucumbers in yogurt flavored with dill, hearty slices of bread to eat with olive oil and pepper, honey cakes, grapes, almonds and dates.

Ketu looked embarrassed by all the fuss, but accepted everyone's congratulations graciously. He was much happier to present his gift to his mother: fine sugar from an eastern kingdom, shaped into flowers and infused with the flavors of honeysuckle and apricot blossoms. To many of the courtiers, Damalepazhur saw, it seemed a poor gift, but he knew it was far richer than anything Ketu had given her in years past and that Dolma was deeply touched.

She held Ketu's face in her hands and blessed him: "You are a good boy. You are a gentle and loving boy, and you do wrong to no one. May you always shine, my dearest." They smiled and leaned their foreheads together, and then she gave him one of the little sugar flowers and he laughed and ate it.

Damalepazhur had his gifts for Dolma and Ketu: matching silver cups patterned with shooting stars and set with diamonds. All the courtiers exclaimed over the cups, passing them from hand to hand to admire them. Ketu held his cup as if he'd never seen anything so beautiful, and Dolma blushed, saying, "It's far too much for the likes of me, my lord," and he waved off her protests.

"You are the mother of my diamond; of course I wish to honor you."

"I have a gift for my lord chamberlain as well," Ketu said uncertainly and laid a leather pouch on the table before Lukaru. "You have been as a father to me for the last year."

Lukaru smiled with genuine pleasure. "Thank you, my boy." The leather was soft and supple, ornately stitched. "It is a lovely gift."

Ketu smiled and glanced at Damalepazhur, who smiled back at him and gestured for the boy to join him. Ketu sat at his feet, then knelt up to whisper, "Thank you," and kissed his hand. Damalepazhur caressed his cheek fondly, and the boy sat at his feet again.

"Perhaps we ought to share a drink, if we are Ketu's parents," Dolma teased Lukaru and handed him her cup. One of the pages filled it with wine and Lukaru drank--it was more than a sip, too--and then gave the cup back to her. She laughed and drank what remained, and set the cup on the table. The maidservants were bringing in more platters, and Dolma said, "I have made something in honor of the comet. I hope you will like this, my lord."



"I'm certain I will." The platters were piled high with small white sunburst-shaped cakes, interspersed with bright orange fruit and bits of candied ginger. The maidservant bowed to Damalepazhur and offered him the first taste; the cake was crisp at the first bite and melted on his tongue. "Delicious," he decreed and everyone else helped themselves.

Damalepazhur took another from the tray and started to hold it to his mouth, then smiled and held the cake to Ketu's. "Eat." Ketu started to take the cake from his fingers, and Damalepazhur pulled it back from his mouth. "No. Let me feed you."

"My lord," Ketu began.

"It's your birthday," Damalepazhur said. "Let me give this to you."

"You've given me your gift."

"Allow me to give another."

"Eating from the king's hand, what will people say?" Ketu murmured, but took hold of Damalepazhur's wrist and gently bit into the cake.

"They will say, 'What delicious cake,'" Damalepazhur said and wiped a crumb from the corner of Ketu's mouth with this thumb. Ketu blushed and sat back on his heels, watching the revelers rather than look at the king.

Lukaru ate a few cakes but put the next one down, frowning. "Something has disagreed with me," he said and turned away from the table.

Dolma said to one of the assistants, her face concerned, "Fetch a purge. My lord chamberlain is not well." She inhaled and pressed her hand to her stomach. "I am not so well either."

"Too many sweets," Ketu murmured. "She will overdo. May I?"

"Of course," Damalepazhur said and Ketu went to his mother. All the court, his wives, his children, his generals, were still feasting and drinking, not paying mind to what was happening at the main table--until Lukaru gave a great groan and swept crockery and food from the table as he fell onto his back.

Someone screamed and Damalepazhur leaped to his feet and went to Lukaru. Ketu's face had gone pale and Dolma's eyes grew round as she grabbed Ketu's hand. Lukaru's face purpled as he clutched at the robes over his chest. "He's not breathing--he's not breathing!" Damalepazhur said, not knowing what else to do as he dropped onto his knees at Lukaru's side.

Their eyes met, Lukaru's red and panicked, and Damalepazhur ignored the bustling and noise around him as he held Lukaru's face in his hands. "You promised not to leave me," Damalepazhur said, his eyes stinging, and Lukaru's breath hitched and labored and stopped.

The king's physician had joined them finally, first bending to listen for Lukaru's heart, and then slowly closing Lukaru's eyes. "I am sorry, my lord," he said.

Damalepazhur got his feet. He was dimly aware of Dolma taking the purging herbs her assistant had brought and the doctor holding her shoulders as she vomited the poison; of Ketu, his face written with despair and confusion; of the soldiers stationing themselves at every door, of his children crying, of the faces of his wives.

And Lukaru, his love. His eyes closed, never again to open.

Damalepazhur gave a great roar and pushed over the table, causing everyone but the soldiers to scream and scatter, and Ketu bent protectively over his mother. He crushed the little white cakes beneath his feet, he smashed wine jars to the floor, he threw platters at the walls. Anaveh tried to grab his arms, crying, "Calm yourself, my lord!" and he shoved her away, into the arms of the other wives. His eyes saw nothing but the great dark in which he had lost Lukaru, and he could not scream loud enough to bring him out.

Strong arms bound around him and he shoved his hands against the narrow body. Through his own sobs and the frightened sounds of the court he heard a soft whisper, "My lord, my good Damal, hush, hush," but not even his diamond could work his magic today.

Stronger hands took hold of him, ripping him from Ketu's arms. He heard the physician say, "Take him to his chambers, I will attend to him soon," and his guards bore him away, ignoring his cries of rage and pain.

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Damalepazhur's guards stayed with him until the physician came, and he gave the king a potion to make him sleep, answering his questions in a solemn tone. Yes, Dolma lived, though she was still ill. No, no one else was showing signs of poisoning. Yes, he had investigated the wine and food: there had been a gritty substance in the bottom of the two silver cups.

"My diamond," Damalepazhur said. "Someone has tried to kill my diamond."

"So it would appear, my lord," the physician said. "Sleep. We will discuss it further after you've rested."

Damalepazhur slept. When he woke, the sun was not yet up and his head felt heavy. An oil lamp burned on the table and Ketu knelt at it, his head resting on his arms as he slept. Damalepazhur pushed himself off his bed, went to Ketu and shoved his shoulder. "Go to your mother."

The boy woke and blinked at him. "She is sleeping. I'm staying with you."

"By Azhur's balls, boy! Go to your mother! I do not want you."

They stared at each other in the flickering light. Ketu said in a trembling voice, "My lord, you are

not the only one who has lost a friend tonight."

Damalepazhur fell onto his knees and pressed his hands to his eyes. The sleeping potion had not rid him of his grief--only buried it, and he felt sobs tear from his chest as if they were strips of skin.

"Oh, my lord," Ketu whispered and he felt the boy's arms once more go around him. "Oh, my king. My good Damalepazhur."

"He was more than my friend," Damalepazhur said when he had calmed enough to speak. "I loved him, body and soul. More than my wives, more than my children--more than my people, sometimes. If he had asked me to walk away from my kingdom I would have gone, if it meant I could be with him."

Ketu's head was bent over his, and he petted Damalepazhur's cheek like a mother comforting a child frightened in the night. "I loved him as well, my lord, as any boy who's never known a father would. He was good to me."

Damalepazhur smiled against the boy's linen-clad shoulder. "He used to say he saw the face of Azhur in you."

Ketu chuckled. "Many people say that, my lord. What it means, I do not know. No one knows truly what Azhur looks like."

"Since you have come to my palace, the statues of Azhur have begun to look like you." He raised his head to look at the boy. "Do you believe it? Do you truly believe you are a son of Azhur?"

Ketu bit his lip in thought. "I believe my mother believes it. It's not a question I would ever dare to ask."

Damalepazhur nodded, frowning. "Whoever did this does not believe it," he said and Ketu's eyes widened. "If they believed you to be a child of Azhur, they would never dare to harm you, nor to harm Dolma. Even if they did not respect the river folk, they would still respect the chosen of Azhur."

"It could be anyone, in that case," Ketu said. "Many people give lip service to faith."

"It would not be one of my soldiers. A fighting man would never go against Azhur, and none of them would wish you dead." He sighed and rubbed his eyes. "I need Lukaru to solve this. I cannot--I am not a man of logic."

Ketu's hand hesitated, then he gently began to stroke the back of Damalepazhur's head. Damalepazhur sighed and closed his eyes and let the touch soothe him. "You should sleep, my lord. We will solve this together in the morning--you and the physician and the captain of your guard."

"And my diamond," he said, looking at Ketu again, and the boy smiled uncertainly. "You're all I have left."

"You have me until my last breath," Ketu said.

"That will be far too soon, if we do not find the assassin," Damalepazhur said. He got to his feet and climbed into his bed, watching Ketu douse the lamp and then his moonlit form get into his own bed at the foot of the king's. He said quietly, "Knowing this--knowing that I love Lukaru--will they dethrone me for it?"

Ketu's voice was calm in the dark. "You are the king, my lord. You may do as you like. And you have fathered sons and daughters--no one would say you have not fulfilled your duty to the land."

Damalepazhur pondered this, then said even more quietly, "Do you think less of me, knowing this?"

"No, my lord," the boy said simply and Damalepazhur was comforted.

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In the morning, Damalepazhur gathered his advisers: his physician, the court astrologers, the chief scribe, the captain of his guards, the steward Lukaru had found to replace the one he'd had to execute, and Ketu. He looked at the boy, two decades or more younger than the rest of them, and thought it strangely fitting that, of all of them, Ketu was the one in whom he most believed.

When they were seated and the pages brought them wine (in cups they washed before the advisers' eyes), he said, "I have been thinking of the night of the comet. Lukaru woke me, saying I would never see such a miracle again in my lifetime, and took me out to the garden. My father was there with his guards--you were there, Ozocay, I remember you well--and he held me on his knee. And I had never seen the sky so dark and so bright at once. I remember thinking all the stars would fall and join us. And when the comet came, I was afraid--I thought it would burn us. My father and Lukaru soothed me; they said it meant only a god had been born, or a hero.

"My diamond was born that night. Not a god, and untested yet as a hero, but still a precious thing to me.

"His life has been threatened, and that of his mother, and I have lost my oldest friend. Who would do such a thing? Who would wish so ill of my household that they would threaten the one thing that gives me peace?"

The other men shuffled their feet and looked at each other. Ketu sat at Damalepazhur's side, his face impassive, his hands folded together--but Damalepazhur knew him well enough now to see the tension in his mouth.

"It is someone who does not believe Ketu is a child of Azhur," Damalepazhur went on. "Or who

does not care. Perhaps this person also bears no love for Dolma, as her cup was also poisoned."

"It was none of my soldiers, my king," said Ozocay, the captain of the guard, and Damalepazhur smiled at him.

"I know this. Your men are pious."

"I believe," added the physician, made brave by the captain's words, "it was someone at the feast. I believe it was one of the revelers. The cups came from the silversmith to you, my lord, and then were borne by your page until you presented the gift--and I do not believe that your pages would bear ill will towards you or the diamond. The cups then were passed hand to hand for all to admire, and then the wine was poured. It could have been any of the revelers, my lord."

Damalepazhur listened, his chin on his hand, and nodded in agreement. "But that leaves many nobles, their wives and children, my own wives and children, courtiers by the score. We are no closer than before."

"My lord," said Ozocay, "Ketu was not poisoned because he did not drink. It was someone who does not know your habits, that you will call the diamond to you frequently during meals."

Damalepazhur paused and looked at Ketu. Yes, he supposed he did. "Someone who does not often eat with me."

"And you rarely share meals with your wives, my lord," Ozocay said and Ketu returned Damalepazhur's look.

"Do you have a suspicion, Ozocay?"

"Yes, my lord." The burly soldier looked uncomfortable as he scratched his beard. "If I may, my lord--when the attempt was made on your life last year it was whispered that while the former steward bought the poison and the former cook put it in the wine, the poison was paid for by Mikuhuit and it was she who convinced the steward to act."

There was murmuring from the other men, and Damalepazhur raised a hand to quiet them. "I understand there are rumors regarding Mikuhuit," Damalepazhur said. "Ketu, has Mikuhuit said anything to you, threatening or disturbing?"

"No, my lord," Ketu said. "She does not acknowledge me. I believe she finds me beneath her."

Damalepazhur frowned. "I see. And I suppose she has not spoken to your mother."

"I do not believe so. A king's wife has no reason to speak to the king's cook."

Damalepazhur inhaled, still frowning in thought. "Why would she wish me dead?"

"If I may," Ketu said, "her son is the son of your father. Perhaps she is ambitious on his behalf. It

is better to be the mother of a king than the lesser wife of one."

"I would not believe it of her," Damalepazhur began, but then remembered the loathing in her eyes after he sent her son away. "But no matter what I believe, we will make no accusations without proof and we have no proof. No one saw anyone put poison in the cups. No one has spoken threats to my diamond. All we have is..." He faltered and Ketu put a hand on his arm.

The physician said, "My lord, I have taken the liberty of ordering the funerary rites to begin. We cannot leave the body unattended."

"You are right to do so," Damalepazhur said, and told the scribe, "I wish for him to be remembered with all honors. He has served my father and myself since childhood."

"It will be done, my lord," said the scribe, taking down his words.

"Also, write a letter to my brother Telemepazhur, that I desire his return. I would have him as my new chamberlain. I desire his wisdom at my right hand." More nodding and scribbling from the scribe, and Damalepazhur rested his forehead on his fingers a moment, feeling the weight of his rule heavily. An ordinary man could stop and mourn, but he could not.

"What further would you have us do, my lord?" asked Ozocay, and Damalepazhur lifted his head.

"I would have you listen. Whatever is whispered in corners or gossiped in the marketplace, I would have you bring it to me. Whatever the people say, whatever the staff say, whatever the stars say, I would hear it." He looked into each of their faces, each of their eyes, and saw good men, loyal men, men Lukaru had said would serve him, and thought, *How will I do this without you?* with grief in his heart.

But Ketu's hand was still on his arm, and even if all others turned against him, Damalepazhur knew he would always have this boy.

He said, "You are dismissed." The other men rose to leave, speaking softly amongst themselves as they left the receiving room. Ketu stayed, as did the king's guard, and as the pages and maidservants collected cups and straightened chairs, Damalepazhur said, "Come with me to the gardens. I have more to say to you."

Ketu nodded and got to his feet, and they left the palace for the gardens, followed by the guards at a discreet distance. The day was cool, the sun hidden by thin clouds, and Ketu wrapped his arms in his cloak as they walked the gravel paths.

Damalepazhur did not know where to begin. He watched the boy, thinking of how much he had changed in a year: taller, nearly his own height, and while Ketu was still slender and likely always would be, the promise of broad shoulders was being fulfilled. He was not a boy any longer, really--other young men of his age were marrying wives, starting their own households.

Yet all this Ketu had given up, as Lukaru had done.

Damalepazhur asked, "Do you desire a wife?" and Ketu looked at him, startled.

"No, my lord."

"Why not?"

Ketu expression became even more puzzled. "What would I do with a wife, my lord?"

"Some men find them very pleasant. Comforting after a hard day's work. Even the captain of the guard, who spends many hours day and night here, has a wife at home and they have many plump babies."

"I don't want plump babies," Ketu said. "Nor do I want a wife, any more than I want you to shower me with jewels like one of your courtiers. I see no reason to pretend to be something I'm not. I'm your diamond, no more, no less."

"You don't have to sacrifice your happiness for my life."

"Begging your pardon," Ketu said slowly, "but it is no sacrifice."

Damalepazhur sighed with impatience. "I do not wish you to be like Lukaru, devoting every moment to me."

"Why not?" Ketu said, genuinely mystified. "He loved you."

"And you see where that got him!" Damalepazhur exclaimed. "Dead before he was fifty! And already your life has been threatened--if you were to die as well--" He cut himself off and glanced back at the guards. Their faces were impassive, of course; they were trained not to react to anything they heard from the king.

"If I die, it is my duty," Ketu said. "Just as a soldier facing battle knows he may never see his home again. Some things are worth dying for, my lord." He paused, then stepped closer to Damalepazhur, his eyes downcast. "I would sooner die protecting you than live forever, no matter how many plump babies you may tempt me with."

Damalepazhur raised the boy's face and looked into his eyes. There was nothing but sincerity there--there was never anything else. He leaned their foreheads together. "Very well. Our destinies are truly tied together, it would seem."

"I made a promise," Ketu said. "I will keep it."

Damalepazhur held him thus for a moment more, and then they returned to the palace.

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Lukaru's funerary rites were solemn and thorough, and Damalepazhur himself put the torch to his pyre. He thought about the story of the diamond and his grandfather's grandfather, but thought also that it would take despair as deep as love to cast oneself onto another's funeral pyre.

He did not feel despair. Grief and loneliness, yes, but he had his children and his good Ketu to comfort him, and the boy took his duties seriously. Ketu even took to bringing him tangerines with bread and oil, saying the first time, "I believe Lukaru would do this to comfort you," and Damalepazhur could not stop the welling of emotion he felt at the familiar scent.

"It was not the food, it was the company," he said, but did not send Ketu away.

Ketu informed Damalepazhur that Dolma wished to leave the palace and bring Ketu with her back to the rivers. "But she will stay if my lord orders it," he said, and Damalepazhur pondered if he could ask her to stay where she would live in fear. He could not assure her she would be safe, any more than he could promise nothing would happen to Ketu. *So long as there is hatred*, he thought, *hate strong enough to kill, no man is safe*.

He went to Dolma--they were beginning to become accustomed to seeing him in the kitchens--and told her, "I will not order you to stay, but I will ask you not to go."

Her eyes solemn and sad, she said, "Someone must look after my son, as he is so concerned with looking after you."

His astrologers read the stars, but they were mute on the subject of the murderer. His chief astrologer put forward timidly that now would be a promising time to father a son, but Damalepazhur could not bring himself to summon even Anaveh to him. He would far rather play with his children, ride his chariots, hunt in the marshes--and he did all these with Ketu at his side.

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There followed two years of peace and prosperity, but no new royal children were born. The royal astrologers cast charts and made predictions, but even when Damalepazhur followed their advice--which was not often, truth be told--his wives did not conceive.

Damalepazhur was not heartbroken over this, though when he heard the farmers had increased their sacrifices he asked if the land was not as fertile as it once was. No one reported a poor harvest, but the season was still young.

In addition to the murmurs of the farmers, there began a strange rumor in the city. The rumor told of a young man who claimed to be a child of Azhur, who might be a seer or might merely be a poet, but whose words proclaimed that Damalepazhur was not the chosen king of the gods.

Damalepazhur listened to these reports, troubled. "What do the people say?" he asked. Ketu, kneeling at his side, frowned and bowed his head.



"Some say you are the son of your father and it is not their place to question it," his guard answered. "Some do not dispute with him."

Damalepazhur dismissed him and pondered, consulted his advisors and at supper said, "What do you believe, Ketu?"

Ketu chewed and swallowed before he answered. "I believe that this seer wishes to turn the people against you."

"Yes," Damalepazhur said impatiently, "but why? I have always tried to be a just king. Why would this seer wish to see me overthrown?"

Ketu touched his arm and Damalepazhur inhaled, feeling himself calm. "Allow me to go into the city, my lord," Ketu said. "I will listen and bring the knowledge back to you."

Damalepazhur considered this, then waved the offer away. "No--it is too dangerous. Your face is too well known, and if this seer is turning the people against me, he is certainly turning them against you. No," he said again. "Telemepazhur and my other advisors say to let the soldiers find him. We will soon make him stop spreading this blasphemy."

"Imprisoning him will make him a martyr," Ketu said, frowning. "I would sooner prove him to be a liar before the people. He will lose power if no one believes him."

"You would contradict all my advisers, men two or three times your age?" Damalepazhur said with amusement.

"My age doesn't matter to you when I agree with you," Ketu observed.

"It doesn't matter to me now. What does matter to me is that you are safe." Ketu did not answer, only drinking his beer with a withdrawn expression. Damalepazhur said, "Leave it to the soldiers, Ketu. It is not your duty."

"I am not afraid to discover the truth for you, my lord," Ketu said, setting his cup on the table with a deliberate hand. "I am not afraid for my own life."

"Yes, yes, for mine," Damalepazhur said and rubbed his forehead. "Don't you ever get tired of being my nursemaid?"

"Only on days when you don't listen. Please excuse me, my lord, I find my appetite has fled." Ketu was already getting to his feet, so Damalepazhur waved him away.

"You need a wife!" he called after him, but Ketu didn't turn. They often had this argument: Ketu said he had no time for a wife, even less to find one, and when Damalepazhur offered to find one for him he looked even less pleased at the notion.

Lukaru had told him a king's diamond was like a priest, dedicated solely to the well-being of the king, but Damalepazhur often thought a wife would bring some happiness to the lad, who was altogether too serious and looked after newlyweds or new lovers with something like longing. Still, there were no rumors of him dallying with the maidservants even though Damalepazhur knew they found Ketu handsome, and when he asked Dolma if she had chosen a bride for him from among the river folk, she shook her head.

"He will hear nothing of taking a wife, my lord. He says it is not for him."

Damalepazhur found himself pondering Ketu as he sat alone in the king's sanctuary at Azhur's temple. He knew he should be meditating on the mystery of Azhur or how to be a better ruler for his people or even how to locate this seer who still eluded capture, but instead his mind wanted only Ketu, as if he ruled a kingdom of one man. *Lukaru gave his life for me*, Damalepazhur thought, *but he loved me and it was only right. Ketu... need not.*

When he felt he had meditated enough--or that the further attempt was futile--Damalepazhur left the temple. His guards and chariot were waiting to bear him back to the palace. There was a crowd outside the temple walls, and at the sight of him, they began to shout and press against the line of guards. Ketu took his place at Damalepazhur's side to guide him to his chariot, and bent his head to listen when Damalepazhur said, "What are they saying? I cannot make it out."

"Do not bother yourself, my lord," Ketu said and took the reins of the chariot from a guard.

Damalepazhur frowned but stepped into his chariot and steadied his horses, and could not but feel relief when Ketu climbed in beside him. The words from the crowd sounded heated and rough, and he was not accustomed to being shouted at in anger. He started the horses and guided them out of the temple complex, up the mountainside to the palace, and behind the soldiers the shouts continued, as accusatory as if he'd sent their sons to fight a futile war.

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Damalepazhur could not sleep. He wrapped himself in a cloak and stood of the archway of the balcony, watching the dark gardens and the lights of the city below.

Somehow, in the course of the night, Ketu had slipped away. Damalepazhur thought it was the first time he had done so, but he could not be certain; there had been many nights when he had sent Ketu away so he could be alone with Lukaru or one of his wives--though of course he had not done so for many nights. But never had Ketu simply left him, never had he woken and not seen the boy's slim shape at the foot of his bed.

The door to his chamber creaked open and Ketu entered, wearing a black cloak--and he started when he saw the lamp was lit and the king awake. "My lord," he said with a quick bow.

"Where did you go?"

"To find the seer, my lord."

"To find him or to speak his words?" Damalepazhur demanded and the boy's mouth dropped open.

"My lord! You cannot accuse me of such things!"

Damalepazhur crossed the chamber and took Ketu's shoulders in both hands. "Look me in the eye! Look me in the eye and tell me you have not betrayed me!"

"I have not betrayed you, Damal!" Ketu cried and grabbed Damalepazhur's arms. "I would never betray my king."

Damalepazhur could not even scold him for using the familiar nickname. His hands eased on the boy's shoulders and he pulled Ketu to him and fell upon his neck. "No," he whispered, "no, you would not, my diamond. I am so consumed by fear I mistrust my greatest friend."

Ketu wrapped his arms around Damalepazhur's waist and buried his face in his shoulder. His hand, timidly at first, began to stroke Damalepazhur's back, and the king closed his eyes. The most tenderness he got, now that Lukaru was gone, were pats from his children and the occasional friendly brush from Dolma. "I am always at your side, my king."

"You keep me strong," Damalepazhur said, pitching his voice as low as Ketu's. He took a breath and lifted his head. "So what did you learn? Did you see him, this seer?"

"I did," Ketu said. "I saw him and I heard him speak. And--I grant it has been many years and I did not know him well--but his face was very like that of your half-brother, Kekalepazhur."

Damalepazhur gripped Ketu's arms tightly. "The son of Mikuhuit."

Ketu nodded, solemn. "She was also there."

Damalepazhur let Ketu go and fumbled to his bed, needing to be off his feet. "That is the whole of it," he said, and Ketu joined him and wrapped him in his arms once more. Damalepazhur laid his head on the boy's shoulder. "She has ever plotted against me--she could not kill me, she could not kill you, so she seeks to overthrow me another way and place her boy on my throne."

"I believe so, my lord."

Damalepazhur looked up at him and touched his face. "You alone make me see clearly."

"That is why I'm here." He smiled and ducked his head.

"And you went alone, with no guard?" Ketu shook his head and Damalepazhur laughed in amazement. "So brave."

"I am your diamond," Ketu mumbled. "I'm indestructible." He withdrew himself slowly from

Damalepazhur's arms. "You are more than a duty to me. I am your diamond--there is no word for what you are to me."

"I am your king."

"Your father was also my king but I did not feel so great--" He paused, searching for the word. "Affection for him."

"You were not his diamond. You are mine."

"And again," Ketu said quietly, "what does that make you?"

Damalepazhur reached over to caress the boy's head, letting his fingers run through Ketu's soft hair, which he still wore long and refused to cut save at the prescribed festivals the river folk observed. He cradled Ketu's face in his palm and the boy tilted his head and closed his eyes. "I am only the king," Damalepazhur said. "I am no one's precious thing. While you are precious to your mother and half the people in this palace."

He could feel Ketu tremble against his hand as he whispered, "You are precious to me," and blushed scarlet.

Damalepazhur felt his heart lurch. "Ketu?"

"You are precious," Ketu repeated, more strongly, "to me. And so I would do anything for you, Damal, even if it meant my life."

Damalepazhur had no words to answer him. He pulled Ketu close and kissed his full mouth.

Ketu grasped his shoulders, and Damalepazhur thought he would be pushed away--instead he was dragged closer and one of Ketu's long legs wrapped around his hip. Damalepazhur's fingers combed and played with Ketu's soft hair, pulling it from its band, and he felt Ketu's hands rubbing him restlessly through the linen of his tunic. "I have been waiting," Ketu whispered against his lips. "Oh, my king, how I have been waiting."

Ketu pulled himself from Damalepazhur's arms and yanked his tunic over his head. He dropped it to the floor, letting Damalepazhur see that his blush descended down his neck to his chest. His body was slender and long, arms and thighs muscled and lean. His organ twitched as Damalepazhur slid his hand down Ketu's stomach.

Damalepazhur wound his arms around Ketu's waist and drew him close, and Ketu placed his hands on Damalepazhur's shoulders. "May I kiss you?" Ketu whispered. "May I kiss you, Damal?"

"Yes," Damalepazhur said, his cheek resting on the boy's stomach, and he smiled as Ketu bent and kissed the top of his head. He kissed Ketu's hip and looked up at him. "I wish to take you."

Ketu trembled deeply. "Yes, my lord."

"Ketu, if you are to be my lover, you may be familiar with me."

"Yes, my lor--my--my dear." Damalepazhur laughed and lay back on his bed, pulling the boy with him. Ketu gasped, startled, and then held himself over Damalepazhur and gazed into his face. He dipped his head and kissed Damalepazhur slowly, wrapping his arms around his head.

Ketu's body was heavier than Damalepazhur expected. His skin was smooth and warm, and Damalepazhur drew his fingers over Ketu's back and his chest and belly as Ketu kissed him. He wrapped his fingers around Ketu's organ and the boy drew away with a gasp. "Has no one touched you like this before?" Damalepazhur asked, and Ketu blushed deeper.

"No one."

"Not even a maidservant?"

"I once kissed a stable boy," Ketu said in a confessional tone and buried his face in Damalepazhur's neck. Damalepazhur laughed and patted his back to comfort him.

"You are beautiful," he said and Ketu shifted closer to him. "I believed you would have anyone you wished."

"I wish only for my king," Ketu whispered and softly kissed Damalepazhur's neck.

"I wish only for my shooting star," Damalepazhur answered him and lifted Ketu's face to kiss his mouth. The boy tasted sweet as wine, and he gained courage as they kissed, touching first Damalepazhur's face and then his chest, and then inside his robe to hold his hip. Damalepazhur shrugged off his robe impatiently, meaning to acquaint Ketu further with his body, when Ketu surprised him by placing both hands on his shoulders and pushing him down onto the bed, looking shocked at his own boldness.

"My lor--my Damal--I--"

"Yes," Damalepazhur said, holding Ketu by his waist. He tilted back his head and closed his eyes as Ketu's mouth began to learn him, soft lips and a tongue that seemed determine to find the hungriest places on the king's skin. He gasped when that tongue touched his organ, and he said hastily as Ketu drew back, "No, my boy, continue--please continue--"

Ketu bent his head to obey. His tongue was nimble, his mouth hot, and when Damalepazhur gripped his shoulder and cried out his name Ketu kept his mouth on him until the trembling stopped.

"I thought you were innocent," Damalepazhur said, his chest heaving, and Ketu ducked his head and smiled.

"I have learned much by observing," he murmured and went into Damalepazhur's arms when the king drew him closer. "There are other intrigues in this palace beyond your own."

"So I have heard tell," Damalepazhur said and kissed Ketu's mouth. "Then there are still things I may teach you."

"Many things, my Damal." He tucked his body into the curve of Damalepazhur's. His skin was hot as Damalepazhur ran his hands over him, everywhere that he could reach, and he pushed his hips restlessly against Damalepazhur's thigh until Damalepazhur took mercy on him and wrapped his fist around him. Had Ketu been with other men beyond a kiss, Damalepazhur would have fed and drunk on Ketu's body until sunrise. He contented himself with stroking and kissing Ketu, the boy's head cupped in his free hand, until Ketu shuddered with pleasure and Damalepazhur was rewarded with Ketu's rare, true smile as the boy relaxed in his arms.

"I would see more of those," Damalepazhur said into Ketu's ear and kissed his lips.

"Continue with me and you will get your wish."

Damalepazhur paused and looked into his face: eyelids closed, hiding his rain-colored eyes, but his mouth still smiling. "It is good to see that love play does not make you lose your wit."

"My king is the same also, even after passion." He looked at Damalepazhur with mischief and affection. "I believe this is a right thing."

"I would believe bedding you would tame you."

"I do not believe you would have me tamed," Ketu countered, and then pulled Damalepazhur to him and kissed him with all the eagerness of a boy, and Damalepazhur forgot to argue any further.

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Were he an ordinary man, Damalepazhur thought ruefully, he would be able to enjoy his new lover before starting the business of the day--but Ketu was out of bed before Damalepazhur even opened his eyes, letting in the maidservants with breakfast and the pages with water for the king's bath.

Most mornings, Damalepazhur's pages attended him while Ketu hovered in the background to fetch and carry--but this day, Ketu leaned against the chamber wall, his hands behind his back and his eyes on the king. Damalepazhur could not bear to look away from him, even when Telemepazhur waited for orders for the household and Ozocay made his daily report from the guards. It was all mere sound, something to endure to get them away and bring closer the time he could be alone with Ketu.

*And settle the matter of Mikuhuit*, he reminded himself, and scrubbed his face with water to focus his mind.

When a page handed him his razor Damalepazhur took it and looked into the bronze mirror, but then put it down. "Is something amiss, my lord?" said the page and Telemepazhur frowned, ready to take the razor up.

"No. I find I do not wish to shave myself today." He held out the razor, handle first, to Ketu. "I wish you to do it for me, shooting star."

There were gasps from the pages and Telemepazhur frowned even more deeply, but Ketu pushed himself away from the wall and took the razor. "Tilt back your head, my lord," he said softly, and Damalepazhur felt himself tremble as he leaned back his head and closed his eyes.

"Damal," Telemepazhur began.

"All is well," Damalepazhur said as he felt Ketu spread oil on his face and neck. He inhaled deeply at the first scrape of the razor. Ketu's hands were gentle and his strokes even and slow, stopping now and again to wipe oil and stubble from the razor on a waiting towel. He leaned his head from side to side as Ketu's direction, smiling at Ketu's caresses to his earlobe and the point of his jaw.

"You are done, my lord," Ketu said finally and Damalepazhur opened his eyes and smiled at him. He rose from the bath and Ketu hastily wrapped a robe around him before he could step from the tub. "The king is very busy today," he told the servants. "Clean this up quickly, please."

Damalepazhur walked to his bedchamber and sat on his bed. He listened to the bustle, smiling as the pages called and taunted each other, and smiled wider as Telemepazhur came into the chamber. "Yes, my brother?"

"What is going on?" Telemepazhur demanded. "What has happened? You are acting very odd."

"Do you wish to scold me for the trust I place in my diamond?"

"Certainly not," his brother said and sat beside him on the bed. "I haven't seen anyone else shave you for as long as I can remember."

"A habit I learned from Father."

"Yes," Telemepazhur said. "I remember." He said more softly, "I miss him."

"As do I."

Ketu emerged from the bathing chamber and ducked his head in a quick bow. "The bath is cleaned."

"Dismiss them," Damalepazhur said, "and tell what you have learned to my brother and Ozocay." He smiled when Ketu blushed, and added, "From the meeting last night."

"Yes, my lord," Ketu said and hurried away.

Once the servants were sent away, Damalepazhur listened to Ketu speak his report to Ozocay and Telemepazhur, watching his captain's face as the boy spoke. Ketu was factual: he had been asking in the marketplace for information, a hood over his face so that he was not recognized, and was taken that night to the meeting place by two young men who also wished to hear what the seer would say. He had not seen Mikuhuit until near the end of the night, when she removed a veil from over her face to speak to her son.

"His words were strong, my lord," Ketu said, "but false. He accused you of mocking the gods and betraying your duty to the land, and even there, people disputed with him over the number of your sons. He said then that others had fathered them, that you prefer the company of men and that your children were fathered by Ozocay or others--Lukaru even, when he was alive."

"A blatant lie," Telemepazhur said. "All your children bear the stamp of our line, your eyes and nose and mouth."

"And I would never betray my king thus," Ozocay said, his eyes wide.

"I know, good captain," Damalepazhur said. "But as the people have only seen Elia, they cannot compare the rest of the children to my face. It would not be hard to believe this claim."

"And you are pious, my lord," Telemepazhur said. "That he accuses you of mockery--"

"Anything could happen in these palace walls," Damalepazhur said, and wondered at himself, that he felt so calm. "He tells two lies and a truth, which gives him strength."

Ozocay and Telemepazhur both looked uncomfortable, and Ketu dropped his eyes and folded his hands together. "What is this?" Damalepazhur said. "It is no secret."

"It is not spoken of," Telemepazhur said.

"I wish to speak of it," Damalepazhur replied. "I wish to have it in the sun rather than in the shadows. I have done my duty to the land and put aside my own happiness because I am king, and yet the rumors have persisted and now they will be used against me. No more. I will admit to the truth, and if the people no longer desire me as their king--"

"Damal," Ketu said quietly. "You cannot be this reckless. If you were to walk away, that would leave your eleven-year-old son at the mercy of this usurper, and perhaps also his grandfather's armies. Would you do that to your people? Bring war to them so you can have your freedom?"

Damalepazhur set his jaw, wishing to argue, but he could see Ketu's wisdom and it pained him. "I would prefer to admit the truth and see what path that brings."

"That day will come," Ketu said gently, "but it is not this day."



"We must deal with the matter of Mikuhuit," Telemepazhur interjected.

"Very well." Damalepazhur rested his forehead on his fingertips a moment. "Find her and imprison her, and let it be known through the city that she is captive until the seer surrenders himself." He frowned as the three of them exchanged looks.

"I believe," Ketu said, "it would be wiser to allow me to bring soldiers to the meeting tonight and take Kekalepazhur and Mikuhuit together."

"I do not want her wandering the palace freely any longer."

"One day more," Ketu argued. "They are not yet ready to challenge you directly. They do not have enough people on their side. They have chosen a poor tactic, my lord."

"She is desperate," Telemepazhur said thoughtfully. "She wishes her son on the throne before she gets much older. I believe we should follow Ketu's plan: attend the meeting tonight, take the two of them in, and give them their punishment once they are out of the public eye."

Damalepazhur studied the three of them, then nodded. "Very well. Ozocay, please choose the soldiers to accompany him. Impress upon them," he added more slowly, "that my diamond is to be protected at all times."

"Yes, my lord."

He dismissed the other men, feeling weary at heart, and held out his hand to Ketu. "You are angry with me."

"No," Ketu said, taking his hand, and he held it between both of his. "Never, dearest one."

"Then you are ashamed of me."

"No," Ketu repeated. "Though I am not certain what I will tell my mother. She wishes for grandchildren someday."

"My children are yours to share," Damalepazhur said and stroked his free hand over Ketu's head. "Be careful when you are out tonight. I have no desire to lose you."

"I am always careful," Ketu said with reproach in his tone, and then he knelt up and kissed Damalepazhur on his mouth. "If you decide you would rather not be king any longer," he whispered, "I will follow wherever you go."

Damalepazhur leaned their foreheads together, basking in the feeling of peace the boy gave him. "Palace or tent, it will be home if my shooting star is with me." He sighed and pulled away. "But you are correct: I cannot be so reckless with my kingdom. Elia is too young to rule and I would not abandon him to the wolves who growl at our borders, waiting for any sign of weakness. No. I

must stay until my last breath."

"Then also will you have me at your side," Ketu said and caressed his cheek. "Until my last breath." He hesitated. "Do you remember the night you tried to give me the necklace?"

"I do." He pulled Ketu to him, wanting closeness.

"I was angry with you, and confused. I was very young," he added, smiling to himself. "I understood you wanted me but what you wanted me for, I did not know."

"To make you mine," Damalepazhur said and Ketu smiled again.

"So I understand now. But then, I was confused. I went to my mother and told her I could not do this any longer: you were too strange, everything about this place was more than I could bear."

"You did not leave," Damalepazhur pointed out and began playing with Ketu's hair.

"I did not, because my mother gave me some wisdom I should have remembered on my own. She said, Pray to the gods, Ketu. Pray for them to give you more love. You only need to love him to do your duty."

Damalepazhur could not answer in words. He pulled Ketu closer still and rested his head on the boy's chest. Ketu patted his back and said in his soft voice, "So I did, my king. I begged Azhur for more love for his chosen king. And in the morning when I saw you, I felt you in my heart."

"Ketu," Damalepazhur whispered and pressed his lips to Ketu's neck.

"Azhur's will is for you to remain king," Ketu said, holding Damalepazhur tight. "I am certain of this, just as I am certain I am here to make it so. You have my love, Damal. You have my love and my body and my heart and my life. You have all that is mine to give."

"You give me a great gift," Damalepazhur said, feeling his own heart beat faster with wonder and joy. "Will you accept this from me as well, my shooting star? I would give you all things I have to give you, the greatest honors, up to half the riches of my kingdom."

Ketu laughed. "Ever the same, my Damalepazhur. What use do I have of riches and honors? Only love me, Damal." He stroked Damalepazhur's cheeks with his palm. "Only love me."

"So demanding, my lover," Damalepazhur whispered and lost himself in kissing him.

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"I do not like this," Damalepazhur said that night as he watched the city and waited. "If this were a battle, I would ride at the head of the column. I would not wait behind the lines."

"It is not a battle, my lord," Telemepazhur said. "It is something altogether different. Let Ketu

enact his plan; he has a mind for these things."

"Has he?" He turned to look at his brother. "He has always been the most honest man I have known."

"Yes, that is so. But that is not to say he cannot also be wily and understands something of cunning." He was silent a moment. "He has your heart."

Damalepazhur looked at him again, then simply nodded. "He does."

Telemepazhur moved closer to him and took hold of his shoulder. "No one would force you from the throne for this," he said. "It is not blasphemy and you have already produced an heir. But the rest of your reign might be difficult; there might be many who would no longer respect you."

"I know this," Damalepazhur said as he placed his hand on top of his brother's. "But I am tired of hiding. I am less afraid than I believed I would be."

"I am on your side in all things," Telemepazhur said. He squeezed Damalepazhur's shoulder and let it go.

Damalepazhur smiled at him in gratitude, and then leaned forward over the balustrade. "I see torches. They approach."

"Do not be rash," Telemepazhur said as they hurried from the bedchamber to the receiving room. "Do not act too hastily. She is still your wife and the wife of our father, and a princess of her own lands."

"She may have murdered Lukaru," Damalepazhur replied. He sat on his throne, knowing that even in his plainest garb, with few jewels and no weapons, he was still an imposing figure. "No amount of royal blood will save her from my wrath if this is true."

The door burst open to reveal a messenger. "My king, the royal guard approach with prisoners."

"I am ready," Damalepazhur said, and as the messenger withdrew, the halls rang with the sound of soldiers' feet. His personal guards flanked him, at the ready in case the prisoners tried to escape or attack, and first through the door was Ketu in his black cloak. The boy did not smile--it was too serious an occasion--but his eyes warmed and he took his place, kneeling at Damalepazhur's side.

The soldiers brought in Mikuhuit and the boy Damalepazhur recognized as his half-brother Kekalepazhur, taller and broader than the boy of thirteen who had been sent away. His eyes were downcast and his hands were in chains, while Mikuhuit stood tall, pale and trembling with rage.

"What is this?" she demanded. "What do you mean by this, Damalepazhur? Why am I dragged in like a common criminal? Damalepazhur!"

Ignoring her, Damalepazhur walked slowly around Kekalepazhur, studying him. His hair was long and uncovered, and he wore indigo cotton and no ornaments like the river people. Damalepazhur put his hands on the boy's face, making Mikuhuit sputter, and lifted it so he could look into his half-brother's eyes. They were like his father's, like his own, large and dark. The boy could not meet his eyes for more than a moment before he looked away and dropped his head again.

"You are no child of Azhur," Damalepazhur said and removed his hands. "All children of Azhur have eyes the color of thunderclouds. It's one of the signs. The founder of my line had such eyes. It's in every portrait and statue of Nazopazhur. How could you not know this, Mikuhuit, after eighteen years in this palace?"

She closed her lips and stared at the floor, still trembling.

"I believe I know your thoughts," Damalepazhur said. "You believed the peasants are too stupid to know the tales, and that they would believe what they were told. You believed you could use our stories against us to get what you desire: your child on the throne of Azhurahad."

"Your father married me first!" Mikuhuit snapped. "I, the daughter of a king, made lesser to a second wife!"

"You were merely an infant when you were betrothed," Damalepazhur said. "Surely you do not expect my father to wait until you were of age to beget an heir. My mother may have been the second wife but she was his wife in word and deed all the while you were too young."

Mikuhuit clenched her jaw. "Your mother was a herdsman's daughter. You have only half royal blood in your veins, where my son is son and grandson to kings."

"Perhaps," Damalepazhur said, "if you had loved my father better he would have made you his favorite wife. But you did not, and so he did not."

"She was a peasant! While I am a king's daughter!"

"You place too much emphasis on your ancestry," Damalepazhur said. "Your blood does not excuse your treachery. Confess: it was you that poisoned the silver cups that killed Lukaru."

She sneered at him. "Your lover deserved to die."

Damalepazhur moved swiftly to her and she shrank from him, and Kekalepazhur cried, "Mother!" in distress. Damalepazhur took hold of her shoulders and forced her to look into his eyes.

"Murderer," he said quietly. "You took a good man from this kingdom, and in the name of what? Your ambition? Your *pride*?"

"Mercy, my lord," she whispered.

"Why should I, when you have shown none to me and mine?" He wanted to shake her, his wrath was so great, but Ketu placed himself at his side and gently removed Damalepazhur's hands from Mikuhuit's shoulders. He gripped Ketu's hands tightly, and a sly look came into Mikuhuit's eyes.

"You reveal yourself," she said. "Your lover is dead but you have seduced another--this poor lad, deluded into believing he's the child of a god, that he is something priceless and precious when he is nothing more than a toy."

Damalepazhur closed his eyes to keep from looking at her, and Ketu whispered soothingly, "She merely speaks to hear herself talk, my lord."

"You are so much more than you ever claimed to be," Damalepazhur whispered in reply. To the assembled company, he said, "Ketu is indeed priceless and precious and rare, and I will not stand for any to mock my consort." Ketu made a surprised sound, which was echoed by several others in the chamber, and Damalepazhur squeezed his hands. "Mikuhuit," he said, looking at the woman again now that he was certain he would not strike her, "I banish you and your son from Azhurahad. I am sending you back to your father as I should have done these many years ago. I banish you on pain of death. If I ever see your face in my lands again I will not be so merciful." He stared into her eyes until she dropped them, and said, "Ozocay?"

"Yes, my lord," Ozocay said, and signaled to his men to take the pair away.

Once the chamber door was closed, Damalepazhur let out his breath, dropped himself into his throne, and rested his forehead on his fingertips. "It is done."

Telemepazhur said in an uncertain tone, "Are you certain this is the path you wish to take?"

"I am certain. I will not risk war by beheading her, as tempting as the prospect it. Let her father deal with her and her ambitions, and if she tries again, retribution will be swift." He shrugged. "Perhaps she will be back, or perhaps she has enough wisdom to stay away."

"I mean--" He cleared his throat and looked at Ketu. The boy was still standing in the same spot he had when Damalepazhur proclaimed him his consort, his face blank save for teeth digging into his lower lip.

"Oh," Damalepazhur said and smiled at the assembled company. "Yes. Let it be known that from this day forward I will take no more wives and father no more children. I am tired of living a lie. I wish to be what I am and let all people know it." He paused a moment, letting this announcement sink in. "If the people decide I am no longer worthy to rule, I will listen to their voices." He looked to Ketu again, who was regarding him warily.

"As you say, my lord," Telemepazhur said. "Your wives will not take this well."

"We will confer on this in the morning." He waves his hand. "Begone, all of you. It is late and your king is weary."

They all bustled out, some still bearing expressions of surprise and shock, save Ketu who still stood like a statue of young Azhur.

Damalepazhur raised his chin. "Well? You wish to remain there until the sun comes up?"

"You are ever the same," Ketu said, and Damalepazhur could not read his voice. "Making decisions without consulting me, particularly if they concern me. Certainly when you want my wisdom you ask for it, but when you don't, you are as rash as a child."

"Nonetheless," Damalepazhur said, smiling at him. "I am in your heart. You said so."

"I have not even told my mother I am yours, and you have declared me your consort before half the court!"

"We can tell her now."

Ketu scowled. "You get too much pleasure from provoking me."

"I enjoy the way your face blushes when you're angry." He wheedled, "Come to me, Ketu, and say you love me."

"I will not." He crossed his arms. "I will not say a thing until you ask me."

"You are also ever the same," Damalepazhur said. "You cannot let me have a good idea on my own."

"It is my duty to bring you wisdom."

"Then you must swear you will do so until your dying day." He let his smile fade, and said softly, "Be my consort, Ketu. I did not have the courage to do so with Lukaru, and it was wrong of me. But for you--for you, shooting star, I will do all things."

Ketu looked at the floor a moment, then sighed and came to him, and placed himself on Damalepazhur's knee, his arms around the king's neck. "You have my vows already."

"My diamond is what you are. My consort is what you can choose to be." He placed his hands on Ketu's waist. "Say yes."

Ketu sighed again. "Very well. Yes, if it will make you happy. Oh, this is madness, Damal."

"It is the best kind of madness," Damalepazhur said and kissed him heartily.

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Dolma wept, and Damalepazhur worried it was from sorrow rather than joy until she said, "Oh,

my king, promise to me you will make him happy."

"I will do so," Damalepazhur said.

Anaveh also wept when he explained his plans to her and his other wives, but Komolah was stoic. "I cannot say it is a shock. You were never completely happy with any of us."

"That was never your doing," Damalepazhur said, feeling guilty. "And you need not stay if you do not wish to. I only ask Eliapazhur stay, that I may train him to be a king when I am gone as my father did with me."

"Of course he will stay," Komolah said. "I will stay as well. My affection for you has not waned."

"Your affection--I always believed you wished to stay because you love the seven rivers."

"I do," Komolah said with a nod. "You and the land are one and the same to me, Damal, and both are in my heart. There is room enough for all--even your new love." She smiled upon Ketu, who was playing with the children as he usually did in the women's quarters. "He is a good man. Perhaps we can do more for the land as the king's sisters than as his wives, and he will give you the comfort we could not."

"I think that is a right thing," Damalepazhur said.

He could not marry Ketu in the ways of their people: no men were allowed inside the temple of Nallalah and there was no maiden's blood to produce. Still he stood on the steps of the temple of Azhur and put the blue and silver gems around Ketu's neck, smiled upon him and called him beloved, and Ketu said in a steady voice that he belonged to Damalepazhur, body and heart. They embraced before the people and kissed to seal the vow, and Damalepazhur whispered, "I believed I would bedeck you in jewels someday, and look, now it is done," and was rewarded by Ketu's laughter.

Birthstones: The King's Diamond

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Printed in the United States of America.

ISBN: 978-1-60370-343-8, 1-60370-343-8  
Torquere Press electronic edition / April 2008

Torquere Press eBooks are published by Torquere Press, PO Box 2545, Round Rock, TX 78680

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