

Journey's End

A Torquere Press High Ball
by Emily Veinglory



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CHAPTER ONE

"A little to the left."

Mendry paused, his dagger poised. Nothing moved but a faint stirring of the air. His senses had been alert for any sign that the room's occupant had been awakened by his efforts in forcing open the window. His body protested his frozen pose, balanced at the apex of a swift, killing strike.

"Through the heart. I wouldn't want to linger."

A voice steeped in weariness came out of the close darkness of the room. That jaded tone made him, for the first time in many years, hesitate. The voice came from a blanket-draped body that lay still in the darkness, its position betrayed by a lumpy silhouette and now a glint of eye. His erstwhile victim seemed almost quite resigned, even on the threshold of his own death. It was this very indifference that stayed Mendry's hand.

Mendry's eyes drifted as he stood, bemused and at a loss about what to do with an elf who obviously didn't care at all whether he lived or died tonight. Dirt and disarray clung to every corner of the rented room and it seemed to Mendry to be a low place for an elf to have sunk to. But Mendry was hardly in better circumstances, a true-trained soldier of the Dragon working for hire as a common murderer. He had been an assassin for so long and had mastered it so well he rarely wondered why he did it these days.

"Quickly now," the sleepy voice urged. "I abhor pain."

The elf closed his eyes, leaving Mendry alone in the darkness with his dagger and the sound of slow, patient

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breathing, unaffected by fear. His dagger hand began to drop slowly to his side. He had no wish, now, to continue—no matter how generous the fee.

He could not help but remember the last time mercy had stayed his hand. His father yelling, "Do it! Do it for the Gods' sake!" as he held the trusting lamb. His father towered over him, dark hair shot with early gray, eyes rich with their usual anger. He could feel the dagger in his hand, as it was then, a sinister tool not yet familiar to him in its form and use, while his other hand was buried deeply in sour smelling fleece. He remembered how his hands shook then, unable to strike, and then how his tears had mingled with warm blood.

Mendry had learned by long, hard experience to put his qualms aside and take lives, but he was a taker of life—that was important—not a scavenger collecting life already cast aside. His eyes became slowly keener in the dim room. He could make out the elf, laying, his face almost in profile, marked by delicate features with pale brows and lashes.

As a mercenary soldier Mendry had fought both with and against elves, seen their faces in anger, fear and disdain. He had seen the faces of elves in pain and dying. He had glimpsed them carousing together, but apart from the lesser troops, smiling and laughing in each others' arms. But he had never been within their tents and seen them naked of any emotion, like this peculiar elf. This one seemed quite helpless, yet not craven with it.

Whether it was old memories, or some new weakness, Mendry knew he would not complete his contract. He bent down slowly, letting his weapon hand fall lax. His other hand

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crept forward; gently caught a disarrayed hank of the elf's long hair where it lay on his pillow. The pale strands caught the starlight as they shifted beneath his touch. Each hair glittered as if it was spun from silver, feeling cool and wiry beneath his fingertips. The elf's eyes stayed stubbornly closed. Mendry pulled back, sheathed the dagger and sighed.

"I'm getting too old for this game," he grumbled. As he exited through the same window that had granted him entrance, the image of the elf's fine-featured face lingered in his mind's eye, pure as a porcelain mask in the grainy darkness. The realization was growing in him. It was a poor thing to kill, to live by killing. It was poor thing that he had become.

* * * *

With the sky still more black than pre-dawn gray, Castel braced his hand upon the doorframe and looked out at the world beyond the inn. It was a world he had no particular desire to traverse, but on this occasion it could not be avoided. He pushed himself out into the dark city. Even though it was very early, the market was already stirring with the bustle of trade. A man with a tall stick made his rounds, tapping on windows, waking workers. A lamplighter, now douser, toted a ladder upon his shoulder. The air smelled fresh and would remain so a short while longer until all the fires and ovens were rekindled for the day's business.

Castel shook his head, easily dismissing last night's brush with death. Such things needed no pondering—it did no good to speculate about who wanted him dead and why unless he

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was prepared to rouse himself to some kind of action on the matter. It hardly seemed worth it, so many facets of his life were now scratched and dull, and no part of it could be considered a jewel of any particular worth. He lived on out of old habit rather than real desire. The sun still rose and the heart still beat.

It was high summer so the morning was dewless. A listless fog of road dust stirred under his feet and settled across the scuffed toes of his boots like gray-gold ash. A faint sulfurous smell hung heavy on the air. Castel made his way across town to the bathhouse and presented himself at the servants' entrance, as always. An aged, human, serving man ushered him in wordlessly, while the squat, dough-faced maid took over smoothly to show him to a private bathing room. Her expression on his early visits had been cautious and awed, but time and gossip had leavened that. She had some idea as to the purpose of his meticulous preparations now and the shadow of pity was beginning to creep into her expression.

Castel kept his face as blank as a mask, locked in that safest of expressions: none at all. He draped his frayed clothing across the bench and stepped into the great metal tub of steaming water that had been prepared for him. The bath attendants had anticipated his arrival; he sank into water heated to the perfect temperature. Castel curled forward, dipping his face into the warm liquid. His mask threatened to buckle under the weight of unshed tears, but, dam-like, it held against the pressure. Castel washed his body impassively, methodically, with the sands and oils provided, until he was once again fit to present himself to a landed elf

who reveled in all the refined sensibilities that his status conferred.

He combed his hair out. It was longer now than custom dictated and fell almost to his waist. The water climbed the damp strands until his head grew heavy upon his neck. Castel stood and let the scented water flow off him with the dull, metallic sound that characterized the element in this realm. He dried himself thoroughly with the great, embroidered bathing sheet that hung upon a row of hooks near the door and put on the cold, satin robe that was its near neighbor. Thus dressed, he walked out the farthest door and down the cool empty corridor.

He paused a moment at the door to the study beyond, in Falver's Underhill this door would be curtained in sheer silk. Even with solid wood between them, Falver would know he was here. Castel stepped through. Derim Falver, his savior and tormenter, a prince of Balian, but not distinguished by any role of his own making and merit, waited with a thin smile on his plain, oval face.

For the pain of Castel's circumstances was this: an elf cast out of Underhill starves for lack of magic and, after a sufficient amount of time spent lingering, slowly losing whatever dignity remains after the sundering, dies. Restricted to the human lands, there is only one possible remedy: establishing contact with a landed elf. Forging such a contact is difficult because it is forbidden by elven law and punishable by death for both parties. But some ... some find it worth the risk.

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Falver was lounging on his morning seat. His unusual pewter-colored hair was piled upon his head and fastened by dull greenstone combs. Bone and ivory beads hung from his neck on strands of golden chain and his torso was draped in elven silk. He seemed to be dressed in tired-looking evening robes, not the fresh garb of a new day. The scent of stripeflowers about him suggested that he had only recently come from the Balian clan's Underhill, Castel's lost home. The subtler aura of gating magic about him confirmed it.

Falver watched Castel enter the room with unconcealed satisfaction as he lay patiently in wait like a hunting cat. Castel paused upon the threshold, and then forced himself to turn and close the door behind him. Every day there were moments when he knew it would be better to die than continue so, but every few weeks, when he was summoned, he returned.

Castel had known Falver vaguely in the years before his fall. Falver was the eldest son of Sedge, head of the high college where Castel served as mage and teacher. But because Falver had few talents and little will to hone them, he had not risen high on his own account. He still lived in the college in the rooms accorded to him as Sedge's child. Castel, by contrast, had been fostered to Balian, for his clear potential as a mage to be properly developed. His path and Falver's had run side by side, but rarely crossed. Although Falver had been born to privilege, Castel's inborn talents had, for so long, given him the easier life.

All Falver had to show for his privileged birth was his clan's disappointment and a strong resentment, which etched evil

plans upon his heart. Casting his mind back, Castel realized he had been almost oblivious to Falver's occasional and peripheral presence, feeling little more than dim pity that Falver had proved so mundane and bland in contrast to his brilliant and mercurial father.

"Never the slightest distaste on your face," Falver observed. "But the difficulty you have getting from one end of the rug to the other is eloquent enough."

Castel looked up into his cool green eyes. "Why do you do it, Falver? Is it still spite from your testing? I was only there to witness; your father didn't want outsiders present to make a spectacle of your failure."

Falver smiled thinly. "His failure, you mean, in not breeding the verdant magic true. Perhaps it was his age, it weakens the lythur in the seed, I'm told. And it was his shame, too; I never aspired to magic, nor thought for a moment that it was my path to be a mage. Only my father's selfish cosseting prevented me from pursuing those talents I had. And being the great mage did not save you, Castel. It all slipped through your fingers like so much sand."

Falver watched Castel intently, like a curious bird. He was in a cruel mood, bitter, no doubt from yet another imagined slight from his father.

"All you had to do was to betray Sedge," Falver said in a dangerously distant tone. "Just tell them he was your lover, but instead you preserved my father's position. We could have divided his honors between us as he suffered exile—that was what you were meant to do. That was why I told them to

test you. You ruined my plans and for that alone I would do anything that made your life longer and more degraded."

Falver stepped forward, closing the gap between them. Castel looked over his shoulder to the window, losing himself in a vista of trees and dawning sky. He knew what would happen next and he did his best to stifle the dread. He had agreed to this, it was the price. But Falver was testing the limits of his influence today. Falver touched just the tip of his index finger to the center of the triangle of skin at the base of Castel's throat, revealed by the drape of his robe. The aether of elvenhold would naturally seek and pass across this connection, but Falver held the bridge to the slightest trickle.

Castel swayed a little where he stood, his senses swamped with sweet smelling lavender-grass and the crisp night air of Underhill. He faintly heard the chanter's shrill calls and the roar of the flames as the fire-dancers celebrated moonpass. Only when the connection was cut off did Castel realize that he had closed his eyes. He left them that way.

"I do wonder how far I can push you before you break," Falver purred.

"Are you in such a hurry to find out?" Castel said in a tone that was almost indifferent—but knowing that 'almost' was not nearly enough, speaking elf to elf.

"Perhaps not," Falver conceded with apparent mercy before continuing, "not as yet. Though half the pleasure is in seeing how low you'll stoop." He leaned forward and whispered, "The other half is in making use of that sweet body of yours when you do. I only wish my honored sire could see it. His precious Castel, high mage of the highest college

reduced to a whore, and him the reason. His failing and his alone. It might be worth both our deaths just to see the look upon his face."

Castel stepped back. No matter what it cost him, he could endure these taunts no longer; made sharper because there was truth in them. His heart was still torn between love of Sedge and hatred of what that love had cost him.

Castel turned and walked away from his tormentor, but Falver stopped him, swiftly winding one hand in his hair and pressing his aether-soaked palm against Castel's neck. And with that touch Castel's sudden resolve was quickly surrendered. He dropped to his knees and Falver followed him, draped across his back like a great, heavy cloak. Falver drew back his right hand wrapped in golden strands and pulled Castel's lax body against his own. His other hand caressed Castel's arched throat with sinister tenderness.

The aether soaked into Castel's body like heavy perfume, warm and sweet. It sought out his body's wounds and weaknesses and spent itself to heal them. It banished all the earthly insults and poisons of this foreign realm and filled him with such dreadful, inappropriate joy. Even now, he dimly felt the evidence of Falver's arousal against his back and hoped only that the strength of Falver's desire would prevent any further taunting.

Falver's hands left him for a moment. Castel lolled back like a string-cut doll in the wake of the aether's passing, while Falver was busy stripping away clothing, awkwardly, still holding Castel draped across his chest. Brief contacts of skin-to-skin cut across Castel's senses like razor slices. Falver

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lifted him from the floor to the great bed and threw him there upon his back, crawling up after him like a great cat. In a daze, Castel felt an insistent knee push apart his legs and a firm hand raise them. He turned his face aside for fear his mask would break, his last and most simple mask. The aether surged through him, oblivious to his mind and heart, and made his body answer to the touch. Even as he hated it, he adored it—that was the worst part.

The aether linked the clan, those born to it and those given to it. It passed in acts of intimacy, growing as it went and weaving the whole clan in a web of power and unity. Aether came from the earth into the mages and from them to all they touched until it faded away. Yet outside of this intended use it was cold comfort, mercenary, and, by elven standards, a perversion. Mages did not lie with each other—it was not allowed. To be frank, it made them too powerful to trust by doubling the power up and growing it rather than letting it bleed away. When the council tested Castel they were quick to realize that he had taken a lover with power and they demanded to know who. Knowing that the elder of two lawbreakers would be punished, Castel refused to tell.

Falver looked down at Castel's naked body, reveling in his power over one who had held everything he coveted and who had saved the one he hated most in the world. Castel stifled a flinch as he felt a hand upon his stomach, the other pushing a thumb inside his body, a sharp nail caught the tender skin within. Castel's torso was taut, wracked with conflicting desires, but as Falver replaced his digit with his shaft, the worst of them dominated. Castel flinched and clutched the

sheets, the insidiously smooth elven sheets that gave no comfort now.

Falver pushed forward, the round head of his penis butting slowly, slickly, through a resistance Castel's body offered even though his mind was lost beyond the ability to refuse. Falver's hands rose, gliding over Castel's body like swans on a still river, settling gracefully upon Castel's throat as he pushed inside to the fullest extent and then braced himself to penetrate yet further on the second, faster stroke, angling down and deep into a body clenched upon itself but unable to offer anything but surrender.

It was a fitting punishment. His crime had been to withhold his energy from the others of his clan, to lay only with the one who needed it least, another mage. It was as if each tryst with Falver weakened, cheapened and gradually erased the meaning Castel had imagined his affair with Sedge to have. He could hardly picture Sedge's face now, that face which had once seemed worth risking everything for. He could hardly remember the touch of his lover's hand which had seemed pure and good, whatever custom and law might say ... the touch of a man who had watched, expressionless, and allowed Castel to take sole blame and severe punishment without ever admitting his part. Lover, teacher—seducer.

Sensations spread across Castel's fogged mind like the dappled shadows of leaves upon the ground, like moon-cast shadows, whispering. The aether half drowned him now, flowing over and through his sated body like a golden tide of comfort and death. Fingers closed like an iron band upon his throat and all consciousness fled.

CHAPTER TWO

Mendry sighed as he returned to his home in the middle hours of the morning. His purse was lighter now not only by the fee he forfeited in not killing the elf, but also the penalty for doing so. His broker was displeased at the loss of her own commission. His heart lightened to see the old building that was his home. Boldly whitewashed and basically sound, it listed slightly toward the warehouse next door and its second floor overhung the pavement with heavy, timbered eaves. It was a simple place, showing its age in places, rather like himself. It had been a rash purchase, made from a generous payment for a risky commission, and he had not regretted finally having a home to return to each night.

Derek Delan was opening his store, a cubbyhole of a shop with a storehouse behind it that took up most of the ground floor of the shabby building. Even from a distance his straight-cut hair and stark white apron suggested the careful, conventional nature of the man beneath—if not his immense energy and amiability. Mendry was deeply and irrationally fond of Derek, for all his fussy ways. Mendry owned the premises, but played the part of a renter so as to stay within his apparent means as a freelance strong-arm. Derek vended spices and filled most of his space with barrels and bushels with only a counter and the narrowest of isles out front. A plump, brown rat lazed in the sun just where the counter joined the wall. Mendry gazed at it with some disfavor.

"I swear he is keeping the other rats away," Derek said in reply to that mute criticism.

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Mendry merely sighed and settled himself upon a closed barrel. He watched Derek open the store and then open his account book to the current page. Mendry enjoyed watching Derek go through his morning routine, knowing he would not get a word out of the man until it was complete. Mendry often wondered where a man with Derek's youth, he had probably yet to see thirty, had acquired such meticulous habits. And although theirs was a strong friendship, the irony of sharing the house with a man who couldn't even kill a freeloading rat had not escaped him.

"I hope your customers are more convinced by the idea of a guard rat than I am," Mendry said mildly.

Derek shrugged as if their opinions meant little to him and stroked the contented rat on the head with the tip of his finger. "Most people are not as cynical as you," he said, "and somewhat happier, if that tells you anything."

He left Mendry to think on that as he weighed out some cinny-bark for a flushed looking maidservant. When the shop was empty again, Mendry replied.

"Happiness isn't everything."

"Well, that explains where I've gone wrong all my life," Derek replied dryly.

As with many of their past conversations, Mendry was not too keen on where this one was going. It echoed his own recent doubts and he had no wish to hear them out again. Mendry tried to muster the will to leave, but he was tired from a night of surveillance and he had strained something in his thigh scaling the inn wall. He was not quite ready to move

from his comfortable perch with the warm morning sun beaming down on him.

"I have some fresh bread for breakfast if you'll join us," Derek offered.

"Us?" Mendry asked cautiously, mindful of Derek's sincere opinion that his sister would make a perfect wife for Mendry, especially since it had become apparent she was with child.

"Myself and Rufus." Derek indicated the rat. He looked at Mendry with an expression of honest idiocy on his face. It had something to do with his clear blue eyes and sandy mop of hair. Derek looked like a bemused child, although the ridiculous ease with which he spun spices into profit belied that appearance.

"Rufus the roof-rat," Mendry muttered. "Dear me."

"He's sort of reddish colored too," Derek replied. Derek looked abstractedly out the window in the way he usually did when about to ask a favor. "I don't suppose you could look after things for me this afternoon? Sarah's getting a little far along to be fetching after customers and there's a ship's share I have to pick up from the Pecian clipper that came in yesterday."

"Sorry, not today," Mendry said. "I've had no rest and I'll probably reckon everything wrong."

Mendry didn't mind shop-tending for Derek occasionally, but since he found out about his sister's pregnancy the requests were becoming more frequent, threatening to become something of a profession. Derek insisted on compensating him for his time—he had a jar of copper and silver upstairs to prove it—but ... Mendry could only suppose

it was his upbringing. A Dragon Knight did not wear an apron for a living, regardless of the profit, even a Dragon as reduced as he.

"So who will be found dead in his bed this morning?" Derek asked.

The import of that statement dawned on Mendry slowly.

"What the hell do you..."

Lord Fitcher's cook bustled in, interrupting Mendry's surprised outburst, and immediately began reading ingredients from a long list on curling parchment. The cook ignored him and the resident vermin with equal disdain. Mendry frowned, gathered himself, and looked closely at Derek who had no trouble avoiding his eyes as he began to fill the order.

Finally, Mendry gave up and walked, up the stairs in a daze. He could only hope he was safe enough to rest a few hours in his bed. Then he needed a few private words with the deceptively mild-mannered shopkeeper. Mendry shook his head and barred the door behind him. He wanted a clear head before he tackled this, the latest of his troubles and not the least.

* * * *

Castel let the remainder of the day pass in the comfort of his bed, in a state that hovered between sleep, wine and waiting—experiencing the purgatory of consciousness in the shadow of despair. He emerged from beneath his covers only as it grew dark, casting off his rough, human-spun blankets and seeking out his rough, human-spun clothes.

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The common room of the *Journey's End* Inn was dim and welcoming in its familiarity. The manager nodded to him as she wiped down the bar and the prostitutes, those that looked up as he made his way to his accustomed table, smiled a muted greeting. Quite a few of them had suggested that Castel could make a fine living in their trade, not knowing, for the most part, that he prostituted himself regularly just to prolong his life.

To extend that privilege to humans ... it was a thought not to his liking. Although intimacy was largely a casual matter between the elves of a clan, Castel had never really felt comfortable with their natural ways. He had secretly preferred a more select company in his bed and at the end, only one. That was the heresy that had seen him cast out, one that a human would surely not understand. It was important to elves that romantic love not be important. Mages in particular were expected to nurture the general strength of the clan over the selfish bond between two individuals. Time in the human realm had only made him more firm in his perversion, that physical favors should be given to one, or none.

Besides, he found humans unpredictable enough without the complications of intimacy. There was no telling who a human might count as clan; the multiple boundaries of their allegiance seemed to shift from moment to moment.

As things stood, his current profession provided room and board, which was all he required—what more could money buy? Castel, once Court Sorcerer, once Spirit master, now had two simple duties at the *Journey's End*: he used his magic to keep vermin from the premises and to prevent the

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staff from contracting disease or becoming pregnant (unless, as was occasionally the case, they so wished). His two tasks were light for a sorcerer of his talents since it was simply a matter of which spirits settled where. Even in his current circumstances, with his power reduced to a mere shadow of its former glory, he hardly needed to expend any energy to fulfill his responsibilities. Any first level Spirit novice could do the same. He was surprised at the value the Lady Kelly placed on these two undertakings, but she assured him that their accomplishment was quickly making her establishment one of the most prosperous in Himelton.

On the mezzanine that led to the sleeping rooms there was a small balcony where musicians could congregate and play for the patrons on the lower floor. It was normally empty as the guests of the *Journey's End* cared more for their own conversation than entertainment of that sort. Castel had developed the habit of sitting up there, out of the way yet able to observe the proceedings below. Having been cast out by his own kin, he participated in this society as closely as he could bear, striving for a balance between his need for companionship and his fear of the humans' strange and contrary natures. This place best approximated a human practice he could understand, his own clan largely holding to the belief that all-important bonds were chaste—family, teacher, friend or courtly beloved—and sexual activity was merely a matter of pleasure and duty neatly combined.

When he had first been cast out, nearly three years ago, Castel had wondered whether he might find a good home amongst humans. He had met few of their number, cloistered

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in the high college passing on his skills to the next generation of young, student mages. Yet the human books that he had read seemed much taken with the idea that true love passed between just two committed lovers, albeit a man and a woman in every case. In reality, the *Journey's End* seemed less than true to those beliefs—acts of love here were a matter of commerce, even less select and less meaningful than in Underhill. Castel contemplated his disillusionment nightly and had yet to tire of it.

One of the wait staff brought him his meal, serving him silently, knowing that he wasn't given to conversation. The resident cat came over and sat on the table, another stale part of his evening routine. Castel wasn't fond of meat so any part of the stew or soup that was flesh was passed to the cat, an appropriate tithe as she no longer had mice or rats to practice her skills upon. She only retained her place as the inn's mouser because Castel had cast his glamour against vermin upon her body, an unnecessary practice, but pleasing to him in that it avoided disrupting an existing duty of employment, yet still satisfied his own.

The evening passed to early morning without event. The crowd swelled and then thinned, people met and parted. Castel dropped a glamour here and there to calm a man too far gone in his cups to listen to reason. The guard of the house sent Castel a nod of thanks when he detected Castel's aid in maintaining order. Some believed the guard was getting too old for his job and Castel feared some incident would demonstrate the fact and cost him his means of supporting his family. After a while most of the girls retired to

the bedrooms with their customers. The main room emptied and grew dimmer as full night fell.

He was contemplating what a pleasing creature a cat was, when he became aware of another person ascending the stairs. The intruder was a man of considerable height and breadth, but with a strange fluidity of movement, and not entirely a stranger unless Castel missed his guess. Castel was sure it was the same man who had refused to put a dagger in him early the previous evening. He thought it strange that such a man would seek his company, but not noticeably stranger than many things he had seen the denizens of this city do, and in fact some of their practices had come to make more sense to him with time. Intoxication, he acknowledged as he sipped his wine, was not an altogether unpleasing state—though drunkenness always exacted its toll in later pains if one rose from bed too early.

The man sat and waited some time, then cleared his throat. Oh yes, Castel frowned, these people insisted on all kinds of unnecessary speech. Common practice dictated that he should make some comment to indicate acknowledgement of the other's presence, as if he could have missed such a large individual. The man would be considered tall, even for his race, and had the look of the local mercenary class, lean and dark with course graying hair pulled back in the soldier's knot. Although the man was considerably more attractive than the scarred old cat, he was sure to be much more demanding company.

"I must have cost you some wages," Castel said without turning.

"No more than I can afford," came the pragmatic reply. "Though they'll no doubt use the funds to send another in my place."

It was an obvious enough fact, and Castel could see no reason why the assassin felt the duty to inform him of it. In fact the debt was rather in the reverse for although he had not asked it, the man had spared Castel's life, to his own pecuniary cost. Castel drained his glass and resolved to think no more about it. As his old teacher had always said, only a rat understands a rat—a peculiarly apt axiom at this time in his life.

They watched the floor together, silently. A waiter came up in a quiet moment and refilled their glasses; a service that he did not charge for, assuming the taller man was Castel's guest.

"I hear the girls here are expensive."

"Yes."

Well what more was there to say? Lady Kelly (how she hated to be called that, but she held his duty and so commanded the title) had explained the matter to him. Apparently, the girls' good health made them more beautiful and safer partners for those who feared disease, and who did not? That in turn made the Journey's End a preferred place of employment and drew the more attractive and accomplished women to its service.

Somehow Castel assumed the man either knew this or had no wish to know it, so he remained silent. Then he thought, maybe the comment, having no intrinsic meaning, had been uttered merely to support conversation, which had been

confounded by his minimal response. It was all very tiring, but at least it was a change. He resolved to make an effort.

"Business is brisk," he ventured at last. "So one must assume they are worth the price."

"Oh indeed," the man replied. "I'm told their price allows them to work no more than they please and to pick and choose their customers. A man must pay court and convince a *Journey* girl to take him on."

The silence stretched and Castel let it be, still quite confused as to the man's purpose. His continued presence in spite of the silence began to make Castel curious. It was always a great game at court to try and untangle the many and often conflicting duties that bound folk to their actions. With humans, duties were less numerous but infinitely more subtle—and it was certainly a much harder task to discern their motives. It was almost as if most humans had no idea what motivated their actions at all.

Castel drained his cup several more times, but the assassin merely waved the girl away; it raised him in Castel's esteem. Though he demonstrated it little, the assassin obviously valued moderation. It indicated either a very simple mind or a very sophisticated one and the latter seemed more likely in this case.

"That girl," the man said, "with the old gent. I wonder why she picked him. He might be rich, of course, but many more attractive suitors are available."

Castel frowned and looked at the couple indicated. "His wealth is of no import," he explained, pleased to know for

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once what to say. "The manager requires the ladies to charge on a fixed scale. No, the answer is much simpler."

The man reached out to stroke the cat that still lay on the table between them. She pulled herself away and dropped to the floor, stalking off across the balcony. Castel understood her response, touch more often augured hurt than comfort for her and she responded accordingly. It was something Castel understood and practiced, to some extent, though having the benefit of elvenintelligence and judgment, he need not be so absolute in his own behavior.

"Simpler than that?" the man prompted, leaving his hand laying on the table. It was a strong hand, though scarred, and its placement was suggestive of a certain attempt to close the gap between them, something his words also seemed designed to achieve.

"She is fond of flowers and poetry, but more than that, of certain types of flowers and writers of poetry. He took the time to discover her preferences and delivered them with every appearance of sincere regard." Castel leaned back and considered the pair; they were engrossed in each other's company beyond the mere physical transaction that formed the basis of their association. Their contentedness was a thing that confused him, the blend of tawdry sexuality with true regard, yet it seemed to spring up all around him in this human land. He expounded on his point, as the assassin still seemed bemused.

"With every dollar earned each subsequent dollar holds less sway," Castel explained. "There is a limit to how much money one desires to earn, but for another to make an effort

on one's behalf, to spend their time and thought, is of endless worth. Attention and effort—that is what sets one man apart from another more than his looks or wealth."

The man shook his head as if he thought the idea unlikely. "Many men would gladly seek to earn much more than they need and ruin the regard of others to do it. I kill men and do it for wealth alone, but never mind..."

Not for wealth alone, Castel concluded to himself. The world had need of murders and found a way to break men to the practice and he did not condemn them for it. A cat killed rats, not from spite but because the hunt was part of its nature.

"The dark haired girl who sits alone, what are her preferences?"

Perhaps the assassin wished repayment for his inconvenience, no matter how unsolicited his restraint had been? Well that was simply done.

"She is taken with fine clothes, a gift of velvet or lace attracts her, but she has an aversion to speech and requires all her customers to be quite silent in her presence. She claims to have heard enough lies from men to last her a lifetime, but it reduces the number who wish to seek her company. They stay a while, hoping to break her of the habit, but failing, they move on to more engaging company."

That quiet lady would be a good choice for an assassin in that she was attractive, not overly in demand, and hardly likely to betray a man in a delicate profession. Castel approved of the man's reasoning.

"What of yourself?"

Castel drew back, "I'm not in the trade," he replied.

"I never supposed that you were, but we each have our preferences."

Castle finally looked directly at his persistent companion, to see himself observed closely by a pair of serious brown eyes. So that was the measure of it. Well enough. He could understand the simplicity of sexual attraction, but he was not interested in repaying his debt in that coin. Falver was bad enough, a coarse, cruel parody of his father—whose own betrayal was still fresh, even after the passing of three years. Yet this human, his narrow nose, crooked from an old break and his cheeks coarsened by scars and stubble ... There was compelling beauty to him, which spoke of sound bones and hard earned strength, but he was a man alone, and indifferent to his loneliness, and such a man could not be depended upon to be kind. Castel resisted the strange attraction he felt to this quiet human, he drew himself back a little, but not enough to insult.

"That would be rather too sudden a change in the nature of our acquaintanceship," he suggested, as he stood and retreated to his room.

As he barred the door to his room, Castel found his hands shaking, though, in truth, his mind seemed clear and calm. He held them before him, thin white fingers trembling with obscure emotion. He couldn't remember the last time he had felt so ... unsettled. This assassin, he augured ill for the quiet decline Castel thought the future held. He felt an unreasonable foreboding. Unreasonable in that prophecy was far beyond him now. And yet he slept that night restlessly,

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with the shutters closed and bolted against the encroaching night and his dreams were full of the calloused hands of a human lover.

CHAPTER THREE

When he rose in the afternoon, Mendry found the shop closed and the room across the hall quite empty. In past days, the realization that his chosen profession was known to even one person would have caused him to pack up his valuables and slip out of town. He was older now and more settled. His cautious, solitary ways were beginning to erode. With Derek and Sarah his almost friends and Castel nothing as yet but the promise of ... Well, who knew what might come of that? He had gone out that evening to the *Journey's End* to distract his worried mind and had returned with a burgeoning fascination with a surly elf. Castel still dragged the tattered edges of his arrogance after him, yet beneath that Mendry glimpsed something worth risking his years of less than splendid isolation.

Who wouldn't be distracted by Castel Balian (for so the bartender named him). He was surprised that everyone else in the room so easily ignored the fine-featured beauty. It was not just that elves were pretty—though they certainly were, even a weary and dissipated elf who dwelt in a bordello like a troll might dwell under a bridge—it was the nobility threaded in their delicate, fine features that caught and held the eye and, partly, the way their magical aura seemed designed to taunt the senses of less carefully molded creatures. On occasion, Mendry had fought both beside and against elves and knew never to underestimate any of their number. Behind their doll-like appearance was a creature beholden

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only to their own kind. An elf alone was like a lost child no matter how old or powerful they might be.

Castel, however, in his shabby clothes with none of those fine elven manners ... He seemed like an elf lost. His inner darkness leaked out of him like light might leak from a crack in a shuttered lantern. That deep, weary darkness drew Mendry as no light would. He recognized that burden as being very like the one he bore, albeit with fewer outward signs of strain.

If he had been asked, Mendry would have said his preference was for girls, that it was mainly a matter of pragmatism that led him to even the most charming of men. His career as a soldier, then mercenary, and finally, assassin, left him largely in male company when evening fell. That had changed now that he commanded a high price and needed to ply his trade only a handful of times each year. Yet in the inn the women were picturesque, but appealed only as vacant flowers, devoid of anything more than passing appeal, compared with...

Mendry had no great faith in his own intuition when it came to such matters, but he felt that Castel's refusal had been more provisional than final. He also felt that he would go back to the *Journey* either way. Perhaps he had a touch of Derek's soft-heartedness after all. The elf was wounded and there were only two ways to deal with the wounded: provide a quick death or loving care. Having already refused to deliver the first, he felt himself somewhat obligated to the second course.

Mendry unlocked the outer door. From the foot of the stairs he could see that the door to Derek and Sarah's suite was open and the light was on. He paused and checked the dagger at his belt before ascending, suddenly not sure whether it was an old friend or a new enemy that he went to meet. It was a long-standing custom that if Derek would welcome company he left his door open. Mendry, for his part, guarded the privacy of his rooms closely and had never taken any guest within.

Derek sat in front of a low fire—a fire that provided more light than heat. Mendry stepped inside and closed the door. He saw a little nervousness in Derek's face, beneath the resolve.

"Sarah's friends are gathering to celebrate the baby," Derek said. "I hope none of them gives her a crib, I already have the perfect one picked out."

Mendry knew Derek was a lot smarter than he appeared, but he hated confrontations. That was probably why he took to acting mild and somewhat dim most of the time. Mendry had known a few men with that manner and most of them got it at the hands of a brutal father. Derek was different from most of them in the way he went about things, he'd avoid a fight, but not at the cost of getting his way.

Mendry supposed Derek timed his comment about his occasional nocturnal employment only after assuring they would be interrupted. Derek did it, perhaps, to give Mendry time to calm down so he wouldn't have the opportunity to act on the immediate defensive impulse. Perhaps he timed it knowing his sister would be safely away by the time they

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talked in earnest. Derek was a deep and calculating man beneath his affable surface.

Mendry silently took the padded seat opposite his old acquaintance. One who, in the style of most men, he cared for more deeply than he would ever admit to openly.

"When I first came here, years ago," Derek said, "I was busy setting up the business, pleased at the reasonableness of the rent, the amiability of the other tenant—you. Better yet, you were often around to help out. I realized you were good with numbers and had enough sense to run the shop as well as I could run it myself. It would have been perfect if you had taken to Sarah as strongly as she to you. Getting to know you over the years, I had harbored hopes that you could be a brother-in-law and partner, providing an heir to the fortune I am building. These hopes kept me in this old building long after I could have afforded better."

Derek stared fixedly into the guttering fire, little more than embers now since neither of them stooped to stoke it.

"After a while I did come to wonder at how infrequently you seemed to work, given that you hardly seem wealthy, but you never seemed short either. You were always evasive about what work you had. It was only when I saw you talking in such a friendly way toward the rent man in the *Arms*—the same man you treat as a stranger whenever he visits this building—that I really began to wonder. This building—the one that is kept, if not pretty, then extremely sound—by an absentee landlord who needs never worry about the roof leaking on his own head. Then I thought about you—the fellow lodger who spends money but rarely earns it and the

occasional nights when you would stay out late but come home sober. I started marking those nights in my ledger. I started noticing the pattern: on the nights you stayed out late, a man would show up dead. I began to suspect and, finally, I became certain that I was living under the same roof as a murderer, under a roof owned by a murderer."

Mendry was reassured that whatever followed could be dealt with because Derek's matter-of-fact tone said as much. He was embarrassed to find his hand had crept, unconsciously, to his dagger blade. He learned back and removed it as subtly as he could to the arm of his chair. Mendry has long suspected that Derek was a sharp-minded man, but he had never planned to deal with a situation like this.

"It's not the word I'd use," Mendry said by way of wary confirmation. He could not bring himself to lie to his one friend, even with the evidence so flimsy—more a crutch to intuition than anything else.

Derek nodded sadly and looked at him at last. "You have learning enough and sense enough to still be what I'd hoped," Derek offered. "As business grows, I will need a partner and the house will need the security of another man within it, especially one who can handle weapons. That you've no particular interest in Sarah has been made carefully clear to both of us, but a partner in business I still need and I could ask for none better. All I would require is that you give up your current trade and we need never speak of it again."

Derek fixed him with those great blue eyes, unblinking.

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Mendry tried to consider the offer. It was a good offer and more than fair. A chance for an honest life, for real friends, a position ... In his heart, however, he knew that it was already too late. It had been too late from the moment his father pressed the dagger into his hand, its hilt double-twined with serpent tails. He had run from high evil, but only as far as low evil; that was as far away from his heritage as he could get. He killed people; he had been born and trained to kill people. That he never became a Dragon meant that he killed only bodies and not souls.

Mendry frowned. So why could he not give it up? His heart answered. He couldn't, that was all.

"It's a fine offer," Mendry said. "But I can't accept it."

Derek dropped his gaze to the floor. "I'm in need of larger premises," he said, finally. "There is a place on the other side of town. I'll go through the formality of giving my notice to Carl, but you may as well know now."

Mendry nodded and stood.

Derek was looking up at him with that expression of innocent puzzlement. Then he said, "How can you be the man I know and be what I know you to be?"

It was in the nature of a rhetorical question, so Mendry did not give an answer, nor did he have one.

* * * *

Castel steadied the barrel as Kelly tried again to get in the tap.

"Damn Barry anyway, he should be here to do this," she muttered.

Finally she got the spike in place and together they tipped the cask into the rack.

"Castel..." Kelly said.

He saw her eyes on his neck where his shirt collar gaped open. He knew his skin was marked there by a ring of distinct bruises, like a necklace of black pearls. He stepped back, pulled the cloth up to cover the marks and left the cellar rapidly before she could question him further. He could hear her footsteps on the stairs behind him. A woman not a quarter his age, but his employer all the same and protective from it.

Falver's little demonstration; he had tried to put it to the back of his mind. He wasn't sure whether the marks were merely a side effect of the brutality, a brand of ownership, a message ... Falver could have killed him. Taking the aether made him entirely unable to defend himself from any sort of attack.

Once again he resolved not to go back. Better to die than to be degraded so ... yet even as he thought this he knew he probably wouldn't be able to do as he intended. To wither and fade away by a form of starvation, to hasten the process by his own hand. This was something that, as yet, he could not do.

Barry was coming in, late for opening, but not disgracefully so. Lady Kelly's discretion and Barry's presence would save him from further conversation on the topic of his recent injuries. Castel was surprised to see the big human, Mendry, come through the door next.

Barry crossed to where Kelly stood behind the bar. "Well, if it isn't Cassy's new *friend*," Barry said conspiratorially as he passed.

"I'm not sure I like him," Kelly murmured in reply.

Castel had some idea what she was thinking, but now was not the time to correct her. Mendry leaned in the doorway.

"There is a ball on the barge tonight, I thought you might like go down to the river to hear the orchestra play."

"You thought I might like to hear the orchestra?"

"I said so didn't I? There's a good place up by the Redflower grove."

Mendry looked solid and stoic, like a man who didn't need anyone, but knew the difference between need and want.

"Very well," Castel said. He picked up his jacket from where it lay on the bar. "If my Lady doesn't need me."

"I do wish you'd stop calling me that," Kelly said, which he took as permission.

He stepped out into the dimming day. Mendry was by his side; a comfortingly silent presence. Most humans seemed always to pry at him with their eyes and the one elf he still saw....

"You're a persistent man," Castel said.

"Nothing better to do with my time," Mendry replied, with the slightest edge of bitterness to his voice.

Mendry had a folded blanket over his shoulder and a bag under one arm. He led them to a vantage point that was obviously already clear in his mind. Others sat closer to the water or wandered along the shoreline, taking advantage of the music that floated across the water from the great barge.

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No one was dancing yet, but be-gowned ladies could be seen arriving, in great lacquered coaches with crests upon their sides.

Mendry laid down his blanket on a much higher slope where the music played, accompanied by the whispering of the trees. The great bowl of land transmitted its sound clearly to their ears.

"So why didn't you do it?" Castel asked, having only just now thought to wonder.

"Just perverse, I guess."

Castel sat on the wool blanket. It was soft over the long grass. He lay back and looked up through the branches. It was still comfortably warm now, but cooling as the clouds drew over, threatening rain. The sky peeked down at him. The raw, vibrant, human music hummed over the water and air.

"So why were you going to let me?" Mendry asked in return.

Gazing up into the sky, Castel answered. "Being exiled is a death sentence for an elf. I've already lived too long. I don't want to live any longer or to do the things I need to too live. It seemed ... convenient when you appeared that night."

"Convenient."

"Yes."

They listened in silence as the dancing music began; flashes of bright silk could be seen on the barge and the occasionally lilting laugh braided with the other sounds in the air. He smiled when Mendry put an arm around him. Persistent man, yet strangely his touch was not bothersome

this day. It seemed more like a protective fence than an intrusion and Mendry made no move to press further. Castel let himself lean in slightly to the solid, warm presence beside him.

His senses drifted out on the strings of harps and lutes, borne up and out by the lilting flutes. The city was still and dull in terms of magic, as human places generally were, but bustling with life. Great life, terrible life. A few sharp pins in the blackness behind his eyes marked spirits of note. Wraiths, elves, others he didn't take the trouble to identify. It was the ordinary humans who were, after all, most interesting. Humans, what puzzles they were. What was it Mendry thought he could gain by this? Falver; Falver was despicable but comprehensible enough, what he gave, what he took in exchange.

What Castel wanted ... he recalled the easy comradeship he had known all his life when he slept in the greathouse in the arms of kin and kind. Where speaking was rare, but touching ubiquitous and one might go days without standing entirely apart from others of the clan. He had learned hard lessons in solitude, in apartness; Falver had helped in that. He had largely unlearned such touching, well before coming to this town and to the *Journey*. Human men were inclined to take offence and either sex to misconstrue ... but still. An elf is not a solitary creature at heart, regardless.

He was drawn to Mendry's body. The thin, worn cloth against his cheek smelled of the skin beneath. Castel moved his hand tentatively to lie flat on Mendry's stomach. The

warmth of flesh rose gently against his trembling palm. Mendry lay stalking still.

Castel felt desire kindle in him, right here in the open with humans milling all about. He became acutely aware of his own breath tiding through his body, warm and wet. For the first time in a long while Castel felt every frail fiber of his body shiver with life and it scared the hell out of him. He had just about got to a place where dying didn't really scare him any more because life didn't hold much interest. But he was deeply and fundamentally interested in this man.

"Have you given any thought to who might want you dead?" Mendry said.

"You don't know?" Castel pulled his mind back to mundane matters with palpable effort.

"It is all done through my broker and she would never tell."

"I'm already dead to the clans," Castel said. "And I can't think who else I have offended." He shook his head slightly, feeling the slight cloth barrier between his skin and Mendry's slide as he moved. "But I don't always understand people very well."

He sighed. It was his duty to the *Journey*, he supposed, not to draw trouble into its confines. Castel knew he did little good in the world any more, but likewise, little harm. That would be greatly changed if a less ... perverse killer came after him, as one surely would. The thought of leaving his home of the last year or so tired him.

He felt Mendry shift, tension shivering over his body. He drew a little apart and Castel lifted his hand, feeling the cold

air between them. Castel looked out over the great, sloping meadow and saw Barry climbing up toward them with a searching look in his eyes.

Spotting them, he trotted over. "There's a big, well-armed fellow in the *Journey* asking after you," he said to Castel in an incautiously loud voice. "Kelly asked me to slip out back and warn you, but I can't be long. She says you have whatever permission you need to make yourself scarce for a while. An' she'll be pleased to know on your return just what you did to piss the bastard off."

Barry grinned and winked and trotted off without further ado.

Mendry grunted and lay back. "You had best stay with me," he concluded.

Castel remained with his arms locked about his knees. Possibility had become truth and needed facing.

"No."

"Why the hell not?"

"I am already sufficiently in your debt."

"Ahh," Mendry said in a considering tone. "And you, like any damned elf, won't go further without seeing a way ahead to settle the balance."

"Just so," Castel replied. He looked down at Mendry in surprise, no longer used to being so easily understood.

"Well there is this," Mendry offered. "My co-tenant has recently discovered the nature of my profession. He is ordinarily a nice enough fellow, but with more morals than make this knowledge safe in his hands. The issue is complicated by the fact that I do not wish to relinquish

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residence of the building, which I own. And neither of us wish to disturb in the slightest his sister, also resident, who is far gone with child and still does not know about me. In short, it would useful to me to have another person about for a while, until Derek takes his leave as he has promised to do."

Castel considered this. It was as pleasing a web of duties as could be hoped for outside of a ballad. The assassin was, as is the nature of the trade, a clan of one. This building being in that scale, his *Underhill*, could obviously not be relinquished. The one that threatened him was not only a half-friend, but guardian of the most sacrosanct of persons—a mother-expecting. It was quite a situation, and made an ally an asset indeed. And here was something worth leaving his tawdry home to follow. A private place with the two of them together—his mind seized on the possibility and held on tight.

Mendry smiled slightly in a way that suggested he knew he was manipulating Castel, but not dishonestly. He was offering a fair method of balance. Castel wouldn't have to hold his head lower than Mendry's. Which was as well. Falver had him in such a state and it was as wretched a place as he had ever known.

"Very well," Castel replied at last, with as much apparent indifference as he could muster. "If you wish."

CHAPTER FOUR

It had been a long and peaceful afternoon and eve, Mendry considered. He had shown Castel his building, a little embarrassed all of a sudden at the peeling paint and listing wall. He had it in mind to see whether the hunter was still at the inn and whether it was anyone he knew. So he left Castel curled up before the hearth, paused to put on his sword and set out across the city again.

Now a sword, with Mendry, was more for look than use. Men just didn't take a dagger seriously enough, short of being killed by it. Girding a sword showed you meant business and there was an outside chance he might need to transact something of that nature with his successor-in-contract.

The *Journey* seemed a little subdued for the time of night, but the customers were there and the girls. It took no time to see that the man at the bar was not entirely welcome. Kelly stood back against the wall with arms crossed and a frown pinching her face. Barry was being careful to stay between the two of them and Claris, the guard, hovered nearby. The rest of the room's inhabitants were concentrating very hard on not noticing that anything was amiss.

The gentleman in question seemed to be behaving himself, for the most part. He was tall and lean, lounging with one arm along the bar. His face bore a look of utter disdain, but the rest of him stood lax. Mendry took to the bar some distance away and signaled to Barry. The young man dithered a little before moving over to take his order.

Mendry didn't know the young tough and on first impression didn't rate him. His weapons were shiny, but not actually well kept. His clothes were tight and flashy; the kind of outfit that looks menacing and shows off your tone, but binds when you need to move quickly.

His surreptitious inspection was made easier when the young bravo approached him.

"Do you know Castel Balian?" he accused.

"I've met him," Mendry replied, without looking up.

"Where is he?"

Mendry pursed his lips. Then he carefully relaxed his body and expression as he looked around behind him. "Not here," Mendry said, as if this was news.

He stared across at the young man, meeting a fixed, aggressive stare with apparent disinterest before returning to his drink. He saw nothing there that Claris couldn't deal with, if need be. Then the young man leaned forward and snatched the glass from the counter before him and dropped it to the ground where it shattered with a loud smash that silenced the room.

"I was talking to you," the bravo hissed in a way that was meant to be impressive.

Claris lumbered over. "That's enough," he said. "You're not drinking, you're not meeting a girl and now you're causing trouble. Out with you."

The young man whirled immediately, as if to attack the guard. Mendry put out a casual foot, which tripped him and sent him sprawling. Claris stepped aside fairly nimbly for a man his size and took the opportunity to put in a solid boot

while his erstwhile attacker was down. He then grabbed the retching body and hauled it unceremoniously out the front door.

Mendry only hoped he was humiliated enough by his treatment to crawl off, rather than angry enough to come back and cause more grief. Bloody amateur killers, drawing attention to themselves and not even having the skills to deal with the trouble it caused them. He didn't think his Cheryl could be broker for such a cur, which meant the contact was out on more than one desk. It was a mess to be sure.

The room was calm now but for the buzz of comment, but old instincts wouldn't let Mendry drop his guard. Something was still amiss. His eyes scanned across the girls and the clientele. Some he recognized and others were clearly of the type. The dark girl, the one who didn't speak, was with a man in a brocade tunic. Mendry's eyes could just make out the symbol embroidered upon it, black on black. It was a dragon rampart. His eyes drifted up to met eyes looking in return.

Dragon knights change as they follow the way: the face becomes smoother and darker, the eyes come to glitter and almost glow with inner power, the hair grows fine and silver-white. But the bones remain true and the same, a shadow of the face that was.

Now was not the time for a family reunion. Mendry left whilst his father would be hampered by his obvious desire to act unobtrusively.

His heart pounded as he hit the street and took off in a direction neither directly toward his home nor directly away from it. He walked swiftly through the dark streets, with a

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feeling of damnation close upon his heels. The sky was lightening to day before he felt safe enough to get back to his home. His mind was still reeling with the shock of seeing a man, and kind of man, that should not be found within a month's ride and a tall mountain range of this place.

The Dragons made what villains the city had look about as threatening as angry butterflies, himself included. He fumbled with the key and ducked inside his room. The fire burned low, a few embers falling through the grate. Castel was sleeping upon the single great bed, knees and elbows drawn in and on his side like a curled up cat. Mendry shook his head. Their best bet was that they both leave the area swiftly and without a backward glance, but if tomorrow was too late, then too bad. He needed the oblivion of sleep or his nerves would wear to snapping.

Mendry cast off his stale clothes and left them upon the floor. He took what space was available on the pallet and pulled over him what covers he could reach without disturbing his guest. His crowded mind refused to consider sleep as he felt Castel turn groggily toward him. He felt smooth skin, lithe limbs naked beneath the jumbled covers.

Without thought he gathered the elf in against him. Mendry's hand slid under and down across the subtle terrain of shoulder, hip and buttock. Castel was a little too lean, even for an elf. Castel's thigh rested over his own, its top surface brushed the head of Mendry's cock and made his whole body tense. He was not quite sure yet that this was, what Castel wanted—elves being easy to read wrong.

All doubts fled when he felt a spit dampened hand brush his hip and settle on his half-proud cock. He hissed as it fitted into Castel's palm, held tightly and moved in small, firm strokes. Mendry felt his own hands tighten like claws against Castel's back. Mendry rolled forward, toward the elf, pinning him down.

Mendry knew that kissing was a human practice, but Castel returned the gesture carefully. The elf's hand moved carefully over Mendry's balls, massaging and then releasing him. Mendry felt Castel's smooth thigh hook under him, urging him on. He put his hands down on each side of Castel's shoulders, clutching the lumpy surface of the old mattress. Castel's thighs curled around his hips as he rose up partway on his knees. The blanket tented over his back and he looked down at Castel, barely making out the pale figure in the darkness.

Castel reached up, running long-fingered hands up through the sparse hair of Mendry's chest and then down his sides to rest upon his waist.

"I want to feel you in me," Castel said simply.

Mendry leaned down. He felt his cock nudging against Castel's body where the thigh and torso met and Castel's prick, stiff and butting against his stomach. Castel raised his thighs, resting his shins up over Mendry's buttocks and arching back. Mendry hesitated; there was something about the elf that seemed too trusting, too fragile. But then Castel grasped him firmly, thumb and forefinger at the furred base of his shaft, and drew him down. The length of his cock lay across Castel's slender fingers and he pulled back so that his

head kissed the crease of Castel's buttocks, sliding up to nudge against his rear.

Mendry clutched the mattress and followed that guiding touch to press forward so slowly. He felt his spine tense and arch as much from the restraint as from anticipation, his eyes closing so that he could feel it all the more. Flesh resisted him, then ever so gently yielded. His cock head teased Castel's tight hole. The length of his cock was still in Castel's palm as he nudged inside, withdrew, and pushed forward again. Castel groaned and withdrew his hand, pushing his body upward so that Mendry felt his broad cock drawn in by a body that strained to encompass him.

Mendry leaned down upon his left elbow, moving his right hand to Castel's waist to restrain him. He entered Castel's body with inexorable slowness, careful to do no harm. He heard Castel's panting breaths and felt his body springing with slick sweat. Castel grabbed at Mendry's forearms, his nailing digging in impatiently.

He was fully inside, the aching length of his cock pushed in deep. Castel pulled him closer with legs and arms as if wanting to be pierced through entirely. Mendry dragged his hand down Castel's waist and lithe thigh. He pulled back a fraction and pushed in again, further than he would have thought possible, burying his shaft and stimulating his tightly compressed balls. Castel jerked his body, pushing against Mendry—urging him on. Mendry released the last of his inhibitions. He pulled back so far that the head of his penis pulled out and entered again, plunging again and again into a body that embraced his unrelenting cock, hard and tight.

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His breaths became hoarse grunts in time to each stab and Castel scratched and pulled at him like the elf was riding and wanted only to go faster and faster. Castel called out and bucked with a long climax that gave first impetus to Mendry's own. He pressed down on Castel hard and heedless of his greater weight, shuddering as his balls clenched and he came in a great, warm rush that left him dizzy and hollow.

He collapsed down beside Castel, pulling out his spent cock, his head full of a sound like the ocean and his eyes misted over with grey shadows. In the darkness, the whole world seemed to fade away into a pale light flickering on a far distant horizon. Castel spooned against his body damp and spent—and Mendry could not imagine ever, ever letting go.

* * * *

Castel woke, stretched cautiously and looked around. His host slept on, with a frown upon his face and shadows beneath his eyes that forbade waking. Castel stretched and felt a satisfied ache up inside his body. He could see light bruises spread over his own thigh, the mark of Mendry's fingertips showing, and he knew he would need to prevent Mendry from seeing them. For a man who killed for money he had a strangely gentle soul. He slipped off the bed lightly, feeling the urge to spend a little time alone to get used to this interesting development.

Castel pulled on his boots and coat and decided that breakfast might be in order. Surely he could get to the bakery without calling death down on his head? He had just enough coin to cover sweet bread rolls or perhaps even a tart. He

stepped out into the narrow hall and into the path of a heavily pregnant woman carrying a load of clean linen.

"Oh, pardon me, I'm sure," she said, juggling her load.

"Not at all," Castel replied immediately. "Please allow me to assist."

He managed to wrest the laundry from her and carry it the admittedly short distance to her suite at the other end of the hall.

"I do think there's nothing like fresh air for sheets," she explained, as if they were already fast friends. "And they are hardly heavy. You men, thinking a woman is glass when she's carrying, and brass the rest of the time."

Castel really had very little idea what she meant, but had gathered that human women caught more easily and died of it less often than his own kind. Still, a woman in child-bearing surely shouldn't be carrying heavy loads? Well, Castel wasn't going to be the one to suggest it—she was a substantial woman who seemed to know her own mind. Seeing him still at the threshold, the woman reached out in an almost elven gesture to grasp him by the forearm and draw him in toward her kitchen table where he put down her now somewhat crumpled laundry.

"Not that I don't appreciate the gesture and any friend of Mendry's is quite welcome. Come have some tea with me and do tell me how you met him. I'm Sarah, my brother Derek has the place downstairs..."

None of Sarah's comments seemed to stand alone, but each piled atop the other as if her voice was a small doorway for the crowd of thoughts awaiting exit. Castel found it rather

reassuring in that it required very little from his side. He had nothing against conversation; he just wasn't very good at making it with humans—they leapt to assumptions quicker than hounds for a stumbling fawn.

"...Is it from his work you know our Mendry I suppose, it's not often he has visitors, in fact I cannot recall another occasion."

Sarah finally paused, apparently ready for an answer as she looked him up and down with undisguised curiosity.

"We met through his work, yes," Castel confirmed with bland truthfulness. "Allow me..."

He took the heavy ewer from her hand, filled the teakettle and set it on the hook over the hearth-fire. The tea set was in ready view and Castel set a measure in with the water and arranged a few sticks of kindling to better cast heat for boiling. Sarah set to folding her linen and stowing it in a cupboard by the window. She was apparently the type to keep in motion and more in need of company than assistance. He settled back on a chair at the table and watched her navigate her greatly augmented frame about the narrow room with apparent ease.

"A good enough man, I was put out a while when he didn't take to me in a way I'd hoped, but when the archer's not in play there's not much a woman can do," she continued. "Besides, now I have to worry about the babe more than my ring-finger. It'll have to do as it is for a while. It's as well I have Derek to depend upon and him not the marrying sort..."

Derek appeared from the hallway as if invoked by his name. He cast an immediately suspicious eye upon the

unknown elf at his table. Derek was a wiry looking human, quite young and not very well kempt—but there was an edge to his eyes that said much about the mind beneath.

"Ah ... Derek this is ... a friend of Mendry's from work, I don't believe I've even asked his name," she turned to him apologetically.

Derek's eyes hardened. "You should be more careful of who you let into your kitchen, sister, and what you go telling them."

Sarah smiled, "He's a friend of Mendry's, silly..."

"And we need to speak about him also," Derek muttered. He left the door open as he came into the room, a tacit invitation for Castel to leave.

"If you will excuse me," Castel said to Sarah as he stood.

His fingers brushed her shoulder, in leave taking, and as he passed close to her his wariness sparked the Art to the surface of his skin. Gently his other hand touched the surface of her stomach where the bulge of the child was most pronounced. It was an honor he should perhaps have asked for—but an aura of something *wrong* drew his attention.

"You must be careful," Castel said, almost without thinking. "The infant is close to coming, yet still has not turned feet first, you'll need to have a good midwife by."

He hoped that such a person could be procured in this part of town. Castel's mind was still more on the babe than the room when Derek wrenched him away, sending him slamming into the wall. His head connected with the solid wooden planks and for a few moments his perceptions were not

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entirely clear. Sarah's protests were drowned out by Mendry's, as he appeared in the doorway.

"Don't bring this to blows, Derek," he snapped. "You'd not come off best."

Castel was quick to come between them, putting a hand over Mendry's, which had reached for the dagger he always carried. "No harm done," Castel said. "And it's understandable that a man be over-protective where a child unborn is concerned."

The anger drained quickly out of the room. Sarah's eyes danced quickly between her brother and her friend, both acting sharply out of character. Castel pushed Mendry gently out into the hallway and shut the door behind them.

CHAPTER FIVE

They stepped out on to the street together. Mendry blinked uncomfortably in the bright light and yawned.

"As I said," Mendry excused, "Derek has just found out about my trade and he is not best pleased."

"You are careful with him." Castel said. He was wondering, as usual, about these human who seemed to treat each other as clan and enemy at the same time ... hopelessly confounded in their bonds.

"I like him," Mendry replied bitterly. "Even if the feeling is no longer mutual."

"You should sleep," Castel said. "You are still tired."

"Aye and hungry," he replied and led the way down the street.

Castel watched Mendry go a moment and then decided he must be meant to follow. He certainly wanted to, but one night together could only be the beginning of more if Castel sorted out a few things. If Mendry was vexed, Castel would simply claim a confusion of culture, it was an excuse of last resort that he had turned to several times when pressed. He watched Mendry's retreating back for one long moment and then turned swiftly aside.

In that moment he decided that conscience suggested another path. To see his way clear to settling his debt he must first find who had contracted for his death. There was a chance that the contractor might decide to eliminate Mendry for his prevarication and either way Castel would drag death with him wherever he went until the matter was settled. To

even be able to repay his debt, he must remove this shadow not matter how his lazy soul had resisted that necessity.

He wandered by the overgrown shore of the canal. To conduct a finding was within the reach of the aether he carried. Any higher magic required the lythur, an energy Falver could not hold or pass, and so he no longer had access to it—but smaller works like glamours, bindings, wardings and findings were still his if he chose to bear the cost. He would need the aether much sooner if he used himself this way.

When Castel found a quiet place, he settled himself on the ground beneath a crickle tree that overhung so heavily that he was all but invisible in the cavity between its trunk and its sagging branches. An intent to murder was strong, it bound predator to prey for as long as the intent lasted. So long as the person who meant to kill him still stood by that wish and was within a few miles, he would find him. If it was some elf sitting in Underhill, or the link was otherwise too stretched or broken, his effort would be wasted—but it was his one way to attempt to answer a question that he could no longer avoid.

He set his last doubts aside. He put his hands on the earth and searched for the bond of intent. It was not simple to find from this end, but Castel's strength had always been his 'eye', his ability to sense patterns of magic. He nursed his strength, searching systematically for one unchanging thread in the many that flowed over and around him. He missed the old threads that used to bind him, to all the members of the clan, to Sedge. They were gone, none of them thought of him anymore. Only Falver's barb stuck in him beside the gray tether of his potential murderer.

He took hold of the line he wanted, familiarizing himself with its texture and type. Following it would not be simple, for as long as he looked for the threads he had trouble seeing the world. Fortunately, it seemed he did not have too far to go, the thread was thick and near its source. He followed it carefully, risking glimpses at the mundane world as he moved up towards the streets; then trailing his hands along the sides of the buildings like a blind man. He came at last to a rooming house in a more salubrious part of town.

He could feel the position of the room that held the one he sought and so Castel was grateful to let the thread drop and spent no more of his precious resources upon holding it. The passers-by eyed his ragged attire with distaste and started to see that he was an elf. They were probably more used to the refined arrogance of emissaries from Underhill than the ragged outcasts living out the brief remainder of their days.

Castel straightened to his full, if modest, height and walked straight toward the main entrance of the rooming house. A simple glamour corrected the inadequacies of his dress. He walked directly past the front desk, the attendant swung around.

"Sirrah, if I may?"

But Castel had already gone past him to the stairs. He walked swiftly up to the correct level. He wondered what he meant to achieve, yet even if it was only his death, well, death cancelled all debts. He smiled. At the correct door he raised his hand and knocked firmly.

A woman answered the door. She was a slight figure with gray-streaked black hair in a long plait, pulled back from a plain, round face. She blinked at him in incomprehension.

Castel pressed on with his audacity and pushed the door further open to let himself into the room. The room was well furnished with wooden chairs about a cluster of small spindly-legged tables. The wood gleamed with the luster of age. Two men sat near the window, one smoking some herb cigarette and blowing dark smoke out the window. All three of them glowed with the Art and their brown robes only confirmed it. Castel walked in and sat opposite them.

The older man leaned forward toward him, while the younger continued to smoke with feigned indifference. Castel seated himself in a vacant chair and the woman came and sat to his left, uncomfortably close. Castel's mind was distracted momentarily, but he forced himself to focus on a conversation that could easily become a matter of his life or death.

He dropped the glamour, which although it would not have fooled them, would still have concealed his faded brown trousers, scuffed boots and stained, gray shirt with its frayed collar. The older man watched Castel intently—he had the look of a scholar with his imperfectly shaved face and white hair combed back impatiently behind his ears where it fell in loose, white waves.

"How might we assist you, ummm ... Sirrah," he asked, clearly unsure whether the honorific was required.

"You may desist in sending people to kill me," Castel replied.

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A silence descended upon the room. Castel kept his eyes on the man he addressed. There was a little, gold thread on his collar, suggesting that he was a more senior member of this curious caste of human wizards. There was no college in this city, but Castel knew that in other places the brown-dressed Iseult taught the Art and practiced it, in that strange and erratic manner that humans had with the wild, native powers of their own land. It was not a thing that Castel knew a great deal about, but he wondered how great their craft could be if they sent a mercenary to do murder.

Perhaps age had something to do with it. Castel knew that this human elder that he faced might be half his own modest ninety-five years. Yet Castel would be counted five years short of his majority and centuries from the end of his natural life, had he not been exiled. The elder stared at him intently.

"I had no idea..." he said, and then stalled, remembering that he must omit those pointless expressions that humans littered their speech with when addressing an elf.

"I have been in these lands for over three years," Castel said coolly. "You don't need to translate your thoughts for me."

The man coughed. "I had assumed," he said. "That is, we were aware that a powerful coven of necromancers were seeking a mage, as sacrifice. One sufficiently weakened to overcome, sufficiently learned to be a powerful sacrifice. Our own we can protect and hearing that there was an exile..."

He seemed to be taking the long path to his purpose. Castel shortened the journey.

"You assumed that a lingering exile might be humanely dispatched, a mercy to him and for the safety of all others."

"Well, yes. I mean..." The mage rubbed his temples. "I am Cleridge. These two, Thrudge and Tirus." He indicated the smug young man last.

The young man smiled slightly at his elder's discomfort, a double error had he been an elf. It implied that the truth was unwelcome and that his elder's discomfort was not his own. Castel endeavored to ignore him.

"I knew it had been years since you were cast out and that you never left the Inn. I assumed you were in the final stages, incapacitated ... I mean, how have you possibly?"

"That would be my concern," Castel replied. "As are *your* actions; you have made them so."

The elder frowned as he parsed the sentence. The silence stretched a while longer as his two followers watched him; the woman intently and the man from the corner of his eye.

"Could you defend yourself against six strong necromancers who would use you to raise a dragon?"

"More to the point, *would* you," Tirus inserted.

Cleridge grimaced. Castel leaned back. The elves had long mourned the extinction of the dragons and to die for their return would be no poor end. But it all rather depended....

"Which dragon?" he asked.

"Salvraddon," the elder replied, with creditable simplicity.

Castel nodded. Salvraddon the evil. With necromancers in her service it was bound to be one of the murderers, one of the dragons that had roused human heroes to wipe out their race. If Salvraddon was returned to life it could only lead to

massacre. The Balian clan had been beloved of dragons, but dragons of a rather different type—the dragonesses of the Verdant Skein who fought Salvradon more fiercely than the Iseult ever did.

Castel leaned back and folded his thin arms over his threadbare shirt. The human's question was not to the point and so he did not pursue it; he chose to press his own argument instead. "If you presume to judge that it is time for my life to end," he said, "you will at least do me the honor of carrying out your own sentence. My own elders put me out through the gate and the Iseult shall not dispatch me with a mere hired man."

The elder could not meet his gaze, how the man had become a leader Castel could not imagine. The young man seemed of a stronger mettle, he might have done it, but the moment had passed.

"What did you do with the man we sent?" the elder said.

"I changed his mind, he is in alliance with me now and his life is my own."

"Clan, with a human?" the young man exclaimed.

"There is no clan out of Underhill," Castel said patiently.

"But I am in debt to the man who does not kill me when he has valid reason to do so and so I am obliged to protect him."

"You must be Castel..."

"Castel that was of Balian," Castel confirmed.

Silence returned, stubbornly between them.

"If you're not looking for my life any longer," Castel said, "I'll look to my own defenses against the dragon-sworn."

"You don't wear a torc," the woman, Thrudge, said distractingly.

Castel sighed, this human need to constantly state the obvious. "I have not reached my majority," he said. "Nor will I, I suppose, but I do not need the mercy death just yet." Castel stood. "You do withdraw the contract?"

"Do we?" the younger man said. He face, turned from profile, was too asymmetrical to be handsome and his arch expression pushed him toward true ugliness.

"I've offered you my life," Castel said impatiently. "Take it or not."

"You'd actually let us kill you?" the young man said contemptuously.

Cleridge had the wisdom, and decency, to look embarrassed. "Elves do not make empty offers, Tirus," he said.

Castel waited, he had thought the matter settled, yet now it seemed unresolved. Castel turned his eyes on Tirus, who looked away. He then glanced to the girl, who looked up at him with some kind of awed fascination. Only the elder seemed sensibly attentive.

"How could you stop them from taking you?" he said.

"I am as strong as anyone here."

"But you are alone."

"I have given you the choice." Castel cast his eyes around. A common dagger sat on the mantle. He took a few strides and lifted it. He offered it hilt first to Cleridge.

"My word, your honor ... I'll have your decision now," Castel said.

He stood within striking distance and held his collar down from his neck. Cleridge stood and looked stupidly back at him. Finally Castel turned and left, hoping his point was made; doomed to live. It was not so bad a sentence after all.

Where was Mendry likely to be now, he wondered with a smile as he turned his back on these witless human witches and their plans and put them from his mind.

* * * *

Mendry ate his breakfast, moodily, alone. Castel had slipped away from him on the trail of whatever elven imperative had reared its head. Mendry did not rightly know why he was so fixed on Castel. He was not entirely sure.... It could just be that elven beauty, combined with a very unelven loneliness and vulnerability, that drew him, but it felt like more. There was little in his life to date with which he could compare these feelings to properly know their nature.

He slammed down his cold soup, uneaten, and dropped proper payment beside it. It was ridiculous at his age and in his station, but it must be first love. He scowled at the notion. And then there was the matter of Mrabel, his father. He must be a full Dragon now, able to kill with the slightest touch, able to use the souls of the dead to work powerful magics. A legacy passed from father to son down through six generations, but not beyond due to the desertion of a certain wayward seventh son. Mendry had seen what it did to his grandfather and he had no intention of becoming dragon-sworn.

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Mendry knew that he could not afford to confront the Dragon Knights. Whatever their intent in the city, he could not stop them. He could stay face them—facing death or transformation ... although, no, they could not turn him. Or would not. Not until he had children who could carry on the line. The dragon blood would turn only those that descended directly from the one who had first tasted Salvradon's own blood—and as far as he knew he was the only existing mortal offspring of that line. It would end with him so long as he had no child.

Perhaps that was part of Castel's appeal, with any woman there was the chance of a child, of the horrible pattern repeating again. The training, the passing of the blood ... having never been initiated, Mendry never learned exactly what goal they strove toward and dedicated themselves and their children to. But given their ways, he could imagine that it was cruel.

It had been a dour household for a motherless child to grown up in, full of cruel, cold men carrying heavy secrets. Mendry had decided early on that his only goal in life would be to *not* fulfill their expectations ... even though he did not truly know what those expectations were. He had run away from home as soon as he was old enough to, as soon as his father started urging him to ensure the line continued into the next generation so that he might take the blood and become the seventh Dragon.

Mendry walked the city. It was a bright day and the Dragons would probably not be around, they preferred the night. Mendry looked for them all the same, his father, uncle,

grandfather, great grandfather, great great grandfather and great great great grandfather. He walked the streets without direction, daring fate to cross his path with that of his father. As a young runaway he had expected that they would follow him immediately, using their magics to find him. As the years passed he threw himself into every mercenary war and skirmish he could find. His only skills were with arms and perhaps he hoped to find a quicker end than his enraged kin would give him. The more time passed the more he began to assume they either could not find him or had chosen not to. Perhaps they did not need him, ageless as they were. Perhaps their arts did not extend to such things.

He had to leave town; it was the only sensible thing. Mendry stopped in his tracks. He had to leave and to leave dear Sarah and poor protective Derek behind. He had probably been foolish in thinking them his friends, after all. Sarah needed a husband, Derek needed a respectable business partner and he was only likely to be an obstacle to them finding a man appropriate for those roles.

Castel, perhaps, would go with him. Mendry fastened on that thought. The years had made him weak, and lonely. He needed something settled in his life, something like friends ... or like family. Like the families he had seen in the village near the Dragon estate. Those miserable peasants that his father disdained, fretting to get his son raised so that he might take a father's share of the blood and stand on equal footing with his own bullying sire. Mendry had envied their every careless, tender gesture, the children that ran, playing in packs; the mothers cradling infants as they walked to the well. He had

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lived in a world without touch, without belonging to anything other than a future he knew nothing of except that he must learn to kill to deserve it.

Mendry coveted a friend, a lover, a person who accepted him as he was. Derek did not accept his profession, Castel, with his elven pragmatism, did. Mendry turned his feet back toward his home ... He accepted that his attraction to the elf might not be entirely based on caring for Castel as an individual, but from knowing how elves needed and wanted to belong to a family. Yet if they could be to each other what they both desperately needed, the rest would follow. They would come to know and love each other as individuals with time; surely?

Mendry walked faster even as his doubts crowded around him. He flung open the closed door and bounded up the stairs. Just as he reached the top the stairs the door to Derek's suite burst open. Derek stood in the doorway, wide-eyed; behind him a scream rang out. Derek reached out and grasped him by the shoulder.

"Where is the elf! Gods know I didn't thank him for his warning, but she's in sudden labor and there's no mid-wife to be found."

Mendry's blood chilled. For all that he was ready to leave his friends behind he wished them no ill.

"I know not where he..."

CHAPTER SIX

The elf came up the stairs behind him. His eyes flicked between them, comprehension clear in his eyes. "I am here," he said. He came toward them calmly. "But I'm not primarily a healer," he warned grimly. "I am not sure how much I will be able to do."

He strode past the two men, both looking uncharacteristically on the verge of panic. In the small room to the side of the suite, Sarah lay abed. She gave him a strained smile.

"It's only just begun," she said.

"It's been more than half the day," Derek said from the doorway. "Since noon."

Castel glanced at the darkening sky. Hours then, but still not so long. There was blood, though, too much of it. The child was free of the blood-breath, but was not yet in the air that it now desperately needed. Castel laid his hand gently on her belly.

"The child needs turning while you are still strong," he said. "And the cord is twisted at her neck."

He glanced up at Derek and Mendry and saw little to help him. Sarah, however, met his gaze evenly, defiant of her own weakness and exhaustion—so it was Sarah he addressed.

"The child needs to take her first breath soon..."

"A daughter?"

"Your daughter. I will move her to the best position and then you will push her out. The men here will get cloths and

water to clean her and warm some blankets by the fire. And leave us here to do this..."

They took his implicit command and Castel steeled himself to the task. He was not suited to being a healer, it was a talent he could use in need, but too much of his strength drained into it and for a meager return. Castel surveyed his waning reserves and knew they would be barely enough, if that. The babe could be turned somewhat by hand, but the rest would be force of mind and the energy to keep her hale until she could be delivered.

Castel let aether trickle from his palm, through to the child. Sarah gasped to feel it.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Just giving the child strength until she can take breath."

"She'll not stifle!"

"Not with us here to protect her ... But best we have her delivered now."

Castel was only dimly aware of anything happening outside the three of them as he softly persuaded the child to turn, not the easiest direction as that would pull the umbilicus tighter at her throat. She turned only slowly and Castel knew that it was draining his meager strength.

"What are you doing!" Sarah said again.

"Just hold a moment. The child will turn and you need to stay relaxed and allow it, but be ready to bear down. When I tell you, we shall have your daughter out."

Derek was beside her now, taking her hand. Castel dropped to both knees as the strength drained out of him, but

he despaired that the child was still caught. Finally, after long minutes, the babe slipped into the channel that awaited it.

"Now," Castel whispered, "we'll have her out."

Sarah moaned and pushed down and Castel could still feel each part of mother and child moving grudgingly in accord.

"Derek, the child," Castel urged, knowing that he would soon not be capable of taking even such a small burden.

The head crowned and the child was small, the rest of her followed easily.

"Just hold her there," Castel said, seeing Derek dithering.

Mendry passed clean cloths and together they wrapped the child. Castel slipped to sit on the floor. He was dry of aether but for that tiny morsel needed to sustain heart and breath. His skin flushed hot and cold. Sarah was crying and reaching for the babe as Derek lifted the little one to show her. The after birth came within a few minutes more.

For a birth that could have easily led to two deaths, in the end it passed quite easily. Mendry clasped Castel's shoulder, his eyes fixed on the baby.

"Is she meant to look like that?" he asked, looking at the scarlet, wrinkled skin, mottled with mucous and bruised from her wedged position in the womb.

"Aye," Castel said quietly, and as the babe began to wail he added ... "she's meant to sound like that, too. But Mendry, you help them with her. It may help you mend a friendship—but get me clear of here first, will you? I used Arts that are hard on me and I will drop if I don't go to my rest soon."

Mendry's eyes fell on Castel's face and his brow furrowed at what he saw. Derek passed the child to Sarah who cradled

her tentatively. Mendry dropped an arm around Castel who struggled to stand.

"Are you all right?" Sarah whispered in a hoarse voice.

Castel fought to keep his head upright. "Aye, fine. Or I shall be in the morning."

Mendry helped him get to his feet, and helped conceal how weakly he employed them. Once they were in the passageway, Castel abandoned any pretense of strength. Mendry lifted Castel into his arms, carried and laid him in his own bed. Castel was dimly aware of his boots being removed, his shirt lace loosened and blankets being settled coolly over him.

"Castel, you look worn thin."

"The Art takes a quick toll, but it'll pass with sleep."

Castel lied, but saw no point in worrying Mendry or keeping him away from reconciling with Sarah and Derek. With a child now they need clan, needed a protector like Mendry. Castel smiled. Even should he die, at least now it was with purpose. What higher purpose than preserving a child's life? Mendry stroked his cheek, reassured by Castel's peaceful expression, and then hurried to check that the babe still fared well.

* * * *

Mendry rocked the babe in its crib, near the warmth of the fire. Derek came from checking on Sarah in the next room.

"She's sleeping," Derek said, as he joined Mendry before the grate.

"This one, too," Mendry replied.

There was a pause as each man wandered in his own thoughts.

"So where does this leave us?" Derek asked weakly.

"I have to leave this town," Mendry said. "I won't say that you have nothing to do with that, but mainly it's just time. Also, my kin have turned up in town and if you disapprove of my ways ... well you'll barely be able to imagine theirs. I will take a day or so to settle things up and if you're of a mind to buy this place you'll have first choice. But Derek, I'd appreciate if we could bide as friends for this last little while. For Sarah. At least."

His piece said, Mendry leaned back and waited for Derek's reply. Derek gazed into the fire, blank with relief and weariness. He leaned forward and peered into the crib where the baby drowsed peacefully, already looking smoother and pinker.

"All right," Derek said. "All right."

It was still a reluctant concession and Mendry felt it best to leave Derek alone now rather than try to push matters further while they were both tired. He rose silently with a last peek at the baby and went back to his own rooms.

It was fully dark now—the silence broken by drunken carousers on the streets below, heading down to the bawdy houses on the docks. Mendry lit a candle and went over to the bed. Castel lay loose-limbed on his back and wearing only his long white shirt. There was a visible frailness to him now and Mendry frowned to see it. He was beginning to suspect that helping Sarah had cost the elf more than Castel'd admitted.

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Mendry stripped off his clothes, it was a warm night and it felt good to cast off the constrictions of cloth. He settled down tentatively on the bed and pulled up a separate blanket from the base of the bed. Castel settled in toward him as the mattress sagged and it seemed natural for Mendry to shift his arm and let Castel settle on his shoulder. Their bodies slipped together with uncanny ease, like long acquainted lovers.

Mendry felt a slight tingle on his skin where Castel's cheek settled on his bare chest. He could hardly tell whether it was just his own desires expressing themselves, or something more. He held the elf tight against his chest, feeling cool flesh slowly warm against him.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Castel awoke perplexed. He had gone to sleep so exhausted of aether that the very flame of his life was guttering. He woke to feel it a low but steady flame—although he was weary he was somehow recovering. How could that be? The land had no aether here and he had touched no elf.

He inspected himself and found the energy in him flowed dreadfully low, but clear, through him and from Mendry. Castel traced it carefully. The aether in Mendry took a different form, but even as he watched that strength came into him and transformed into a form Castel could use, came from Mendry in tiny amounts—just enough to keep him going.

The sharing of aether, the very basis of what a clan was. Castel could feel himself shaking. So many exiles had starved and died outside of *Underhill*, but had the aether been here all along? How could others have failed to notice as in extremity they must also have lain skin-to-skin with humans?

Castel found that he could hardly believe that it was true, but to be clan with Mendry did not dismay him. There were two main castes to any clan, the scholars and the soldiers. So he and Mendry provided as good a beginning as any to a new clan. And Mendry had always seemed a particularly striking human to Castel's eye. Perhaps some quirk of blood or life had made him stronger or freer with the native aether than was normally the case with men.

Mendry stirred now as he woke. He looked down at Castel and instinctively drew the elf closer.

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"You still look tired," Mendry said fondly. "A night's sleep was not cure enough."

"I may have understated matters somewhat," Castel admitted, smiling in return. "But I am recovering with your help."

Mendry's hair ran wild, unbound, and his face was covered with gray bristles. It only served to make his face seem less stern and more the sort that could be freely loved. Castel reached out to him, running one fingertip over his rough cheek where an old scar cut across his cheekbone.

"I have done nothing," Mendry protested.

"Your indulgence, then."

Castel leaned in and planted a kiss upon that scar. His hand ran down Mendry's long torso, pushing the covers from him.

Mendry stayed his hand. "It seems to me that you should be resting, not provoking me. You stay here whilst I...."

"It seems to me that you are over careful. I am not made of glass." Castel straddled Mendry's body and leaned over, the tips of his heavy-falling hair brushing Mendry's face. "Or are you under the impression that I am the biddable sort."

"You do not have what most would call a willful temperament, I think."

"Humans have a strange way of mistaking will with mere words," Castel chided. He emphasized his statement by sliding down to settle on Mendry's thighs and resting his hand over the silken head of Mendry's cock. He teased the hood with his thumb. "Perhaps you would rather I was swooning

like some vaporous lady, rather than taking an interest in—other things."

"Far be it from me to deter you from any course you are set upon." Mendry's voice sounded quite strained.

Castel smiled as he bent. With thumb and tongue he teased back the delicate skin to reveal the wet, soft head of the penis. He covered it with his mouth and let his tongue tip probe and outlined every contour. Old skills came back to him with the flash of bright memories that he pushed aside, old lovers, slight and perfumed and more indifferent in their hearts than this.

Mendry writhed beneath him but Castel was merciless. The time for leisurely love-making would come, but for now he wanted only to drive this man wild. Grasping each broad thigh he lowered his lips to take a little more each time, licking the underside of the cock and feeling down with his hand. The head of the cock nestled against his throat, bigger than any he had ministered to before.

One finger traced down between Mendry's legs, teasing the cleft. Castel held his breath as the cock slid into his throat. He felt it fill and press against him, heard the stern assassin quietly invoking his Gods. Castel felt quiet satisfaction feeling his lover panting and shuddering beneath him. He took the cock in, almost to its fullest extent, perhaps another time he might manage that. He drew back and teased the hard, upstanding prick with nips and long licks, covering the head and pushing the cock deep within him—every attention unpredictable and moving from quick to slow, soft to vigorous.

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He paused a while, Mendry's wet cock pushing up into the air before him. Gently he blew air across the head, watching it twitch with exquisite sensitivity. Mendry's hips moved on the brink of coming. Castel pushed his dampened finger into Mendry's ass and with his other hand he pulled up hard on the cock from base to tip. Mendry came with a tortured moan, spilling his seed in a copious jet.

Castel sat back and looked down at Mendry's flushed and dazed face.

"Now perhaps I *shall* rest here awhile," Castel admitted. He slid from Mendry's body and wrapped the warm covers about him. He was still tired and more than a little satisfied with himself.

Mendry lay still upon his back a while and Castel thought he might have fallen asleep again, but after a while he replied. "Far be it from me to ever suggest you leave this bed."

Castel peeked out from his tight bundle of blankets, but made no move, already growing groggy with impending sleep himself.

"Ah." Mendry planted a dry kiss in the general area of Castel's forehead. "You stay here while I check on Sarah and her babe and find us something to eat. Then perhaps I can come up with something you might like...."

Castel wondered at the ease with which they fell into this familiarity, but he rejoiced in it. He had been lonely so long and was not going to second-guess deliverance. He had no desire for food, but knew that he would need it to recover. Mendry slipped out of bed with obvious reluctance and

searched around for his clothes. Castel watched him through slitted eyes. His frame was large, but spare, and covered in scars that were poor advertisement indeed for human healers.

Before he left he went back to Castel's side. "Rest," he said. "I'll be back soon. There is a matter or two we should discuss."

Castel just smiled in reply. Unwilling to even think about what these matters might be ... he had enough on his mind threatening to push aside the happiness of the moment. He ignored it all, just for now at peace with what he had.

* * * *

Mendry slipped into Derek and Sarah's suite quietly and crept over to the crib. He was not too surprised to see it empty. The newborn would still be by her mother's side. He hesitated to bother Sarah, but in the end he knocked gently on the doorframe and peeked through the open door. Sarah had obviously been asleep, blinking wearily as she looked up, but the babe was not with her.

"Is your daughter with Derek?"

"No," she frowned. "I put her down after I fed her, not an hour ago, just before dawn. Is she not in the crib; is Derek not with her?"

"No, but don't worry, she'll be with your brother."

She half-sat and winced. "He might have taken her down to the shop, to let me rest."

"I'll go down," Mendry said, gesturing that she should lay back. "Don't worry, I'm sure she's there."

All the same he went down the stairs swiftly. Derek looked up from his accounts and smiled in welcome. Mendry's eyes darted around.

"The babe," he said. "She's not with Sarah or in the crib."

All expression dropped from Derek's face. "What do you mean, I just saw her put the child down in the crib. I thought she would be alright there a short while, I was not gone long."

"She's not there!" Mendry snapped.

He could feel his heart beating firmly and fast. They stared at each other for a second, searching for some logical explanation and finding none. Derek passed Mendry and raced back up the stairs. Mendry went to the front door, it opened easily ... unlocked. He searched his memory and could not be sure he'd locked it the previous night, but no ... he had. Before going to his bed he had stumbled down and locked the house up safe. And who would take a child, she had no value but to her family.

Mendry searched the shop as if the newborn could somehow have crawled down the stairs and hidden herself away. He searched his mind for some motive that Derek might have to spirit her away, but found none. He was grimly certain that if the child was not found, it was he that was most likely to face suspicion. He walked up the stairs grimly and found Sarah was up, searching the rooms, tearing blankets from the shelves.

"Where is she!" Sarah said shrilly. "She's not even got a name yet, where is she?"

Derek watched her helplessly and when he turned to Mendry there was suspicion in his eyes. He spoke no accusing words, however.

"Your friend the elf," Derek said. "Can't he use some spell to find her?"

"He's tired...."

"I would have to be dead not to hear this commotion," Castel said groggily.

He stood in the doorway of Mendry's room with a blanket clasped rather too loosely about his waist and hair all tangled.

"Oh," Derek said, in a way that suggested he could be quite slow about some things after all.

"What?" Sarah asked.

"No matter," Derek replied tersely. "The babe is missing. If you have any idea how to find her?"

Castel walked through them to the other set of rooms. He circled the crib and paused, closing his eyes.

"The dragon-sworn," he said.

An ice cold chill struck through Mendry's heart. Castel looked to him, not missing that he understood the term.

"I saw one of them in the *Journey*," Mendry said. "The same night the bravo was asking after you."

"What have you done, what have you embroiled us in?" Derek snapped, wrapping his arm about his sister.

Mendry felt his cool working-mind take control. "They will be weakest during the day. Castel, dress, we must find them quickly. Derek, Sarah I shall retrieve the child or die trying. You should prepare to leave town. I don't know why they

want her, but once set on a task they are implacable. Acquire whatever cart or trap you need to be ready to move quickly."

Castel moved to do as he said, but Derek reached out to grab his shoulder. "Who are they? Why do they want the babe? What the hell have you gotten us into."

"I don't know why they did it. But I know these people. They are powerful and they are utterly without mercy. For any part of this that is down to me you have my apology for all it is worth. Now I must act quickly."

"I am going with you," Derek said.

"Like hell." He slapped Derek's hand away. "You would be a liability and Sarah will need help preparing to flee. And make no mistake, you will need to run."

"Sarah can arrange these things. I am going with you. And don't argue, sister, it is a lot to ask the day after a birth that you get us a cart and load those few things we must take—but if it comes to a fight I am the stronger of the two of us, at least today."

Castel returned in his usual shabby clothes. Mendry looked from gangly Derek to frail Castel and feared the worst, but looking into Sarah's wide, blue eyes, he steeled himself.

"I will need my armor and sword. Castel, can you lead us to them?"

Castel nodded. Mendry had the strong feeling he was walking to his death and taking his dearest friends with him—but with an innocent in peril he had not the slightest choice. He led his two companions into the hallway. Sarah looked less than happy, but let them go.

"It is daylight, that will be to our advantage," Mendry said. "You will both say nothing and do nothing unless I approve it. These people are more dangerous than either of you could know."

"They..." Castel began.

"What?" Mendry demanded.

"You must wait here, out of the room. I shall find the thread that connects Sarah to the child and we shall follow it. It should be a strong thread."

He turned and went back to Sarah, closing the door behind him. Mendry watched the closed door a while, listening to a low burr of conversation in which no words could be discerned. Finally he turned to Derek, meeting guarded, angry eyes.

"Get used to hating me," Mendry said matter-of-factly. "The Knights are my kin and whatever madness made them do this it will be somehow down to me."

"What are they exactly?" Derek asked tersely, letting any other arguments wait for another time.

"Humans to begin with, but once they are adult they take a pact and enter a contract with a larger force that makes them powerful and long-lived. I fled them rather than discover more than that. Whatever they are dealing with is evil and drives them mad."

Mendry's eyes were focused not on the dark hallway, but a worn-smooth memory of his father standing silhouetted against the midday sun. His father stamped down the dirt over the grave and looked down to where Mendry stood, clutching his grandfather's hand. He had been very young, too young to even understand death, but he knew that his

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mother was down there in the ground and he was worried about her.

"Didn't need the bitch anymore," grandfather said.

His father swooped down and picked him up, tucking him under an arm more like he was carrying a sack of wheat than a child.

Mendry came back to the present with a jerk to find Derek watching him, wide-eyed.

"If you think I am bad, you can't even imagine them."

"I don't think you're bad," Derek said with a sigh. "I even begin to understand what went wrong with you to make you ... you. But eventually you might just decide to be somebody else."

Mendry turned away. In a way he would prefer to be hated. "We can wait for him on the street."

Derek brushed past him and unlocked the door to the shop. "I have an idea of something that might help," Derek muttered.

Mendry waited on the street, feeling the wind gust about his ankles. Dead leaves scuttled, catching and fleeing in clumps. He was struck by a deep premonition that none of them were going to live through this, not he, Castel, Derek or even the child. He saw, in his mind, Sarah waiting and waiting alone in the empty building. He had not even made a will; he should have thought to provide for her.

It was too late now.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The thread was thick and red like rope. It felt almost wrong to touch it, an intimate thing, implicit between mother and child.

"The *Iseult*," he reminded Sarah. "If we are still away at dawn you must go to them."

Sarah nodded mutely. There was fear in her, but hope too. "The baby?" she asked.

"She is well, the thread shows as much. She wants to be back with you and by morning I hope she will be. We will accept nothing else."

He left her, feeling stone hard certainty deep inside his chest. It was a feeling he had not known since exile. He had a clan here—a small and faltering clan in great peril, but it was a clan. His clan and he would give anything, everything to protect it. Castel stood up straight, nodded to Sarah and turned away. What they were asking of her was the hardest thing of all. To do what was necessary while weakened and fearful—and leaving her alone to do it.

Mendry stood grimly. Derek was standing there, ready to go. Castel paid them little heed. He held one hand ahead of him, touching the thread so lightly that it would take an accomplished sorcerer to know he was following it at all. It was a deep part of him that felt the bond, the only exclusive connection an elf was ever meant to know, severed early for the greater good of the clan.

"Is it far?" Mendry asked.

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Derek hushed him, perhaps sensing that distraction could not be brooked. "It doesn't matter how far," he said.

Castel led the way through dusty streets and winding alleys. The direct path was often blocked and he cast about to keep it close. They came to the river and Mendry procured a small boat as much by menace as with coins. They crossed over and wended through the town and beyond into the fields. Hour upon hour passed with weariness and heat and thirst piling upon Castel's shoulders. The thread was beginning to fade, too—it was the natal thread and the new child's true bond had not been given time to form.

He staggered and leaned against a dry stone wall. Mendry looped one hand about his shoulders. Castel let his head droop and his eyes closed. He wonder if he should say how the Knights wanted him, how the Iseult tried to purchase his demise. But Mendry would be distracted if he thought he had to protect Castel as well as retrieve the child. The deceit rankled, but he stayed silent. Were the Iseult right and the Knights were raising Salvradon? Was he just delivering himself into their hands? More likely he would collapse before that happened. There was a limit to what willpower alone could make a tapped-out body do.

"If they were ahorse they could be miles away," said Derek."

Mendry squeezed Castel's shoulder. "Are they close?"

Castel nodded. "Close," he said. "I think."

He raised his head and scanned the low hills that climbed up from the beaten path. They were covered in dense, dark foliage from brittle shrubs that crowded close together and

grew no higher than his shoulders. He pointed to where an ebb of water too meager to call a stream creased the cover of the trees.

"It may not be the best way, but is the most direct. I cannot say how far, it could be very close."

Mendry scowled at the occluded path. "I will go ahead," he said. "There is some chance I may surprise them or that knowing their way I can bargain with them. You will wait until I call you or you feel the child is being moved." Derek made to protest, but Mendry cut him off. "I have the best chance of dealing with these creatures so do not insist on perpetrating some heroics that will get us all killed. If I need you I will call. If I fail, do as you may."

He brooked no further speech, but left them. Castel watched him go, feeling dull and drained. One man against Dragon Knights? He turned to Derek whose eyes broadcast both uncertainty and defiance. Derek needed to go after his kin and Castel was not inclined to stand idly by while his lover walked into a death trap.

"If we follow this path around we may come upon a vantage point," Castel said.

Derek smiled grimly. "Lead the way," he said.

Castel entered a trance to allow him to hold the thread and find his way. They followed the path until it veered to the right and then Castel slipped between the brittle branches. Derek followed behind. Castel winced at the sound he made; every time that man put down a foot it seemed to crunch the great, dry carcass of a leaf and every time he raised his arm it snapped a branch.

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They labored up a ridge. Squeezing between the bushes they crouched and pushed through, pulling themselves up by roots and bowed branches. At the crest, Castel paused. Ahead of them was the bowl of a small valley. Every shred of foliage had been charred and beaten flat from the tip of the hill to the other side. The ground was baked and burned black with nothing on it but charcoal and dust. Derek muttered in impatience and clambered up beside him—to fall silent at the sight.

There was a small, log-walled cabin on the higher side of the basin. Castel stiffened to see Mendry laboring up the gradual slope toward its door. Well before he reached it the door opened, the interior of the building too dark to see who stood there to admit him. Mendry stepped inside and the door closed.

"What do we do now?" Derek hissed.

"Wait."

"Wait. We've come a fair way just to wait."

"We can see from here if he needs us."

"*His* needs are not my paramount concern."

Castel turned to Derek. "These people are preparing to raise a dragon. If that happens, innocents will be slaughtered by the thousand. We stand between them and that goal and I suggest we do not fall to bickering or we will fail."

"Raise a dragon?" Derek snorted. "What kind of fairy tale is that?"

In answer Castel brushed a little more dirt from the ridge they had scaled, clearing away the grime and accumulated soil of a thousand years. Beneath his hand what had seemed

like a jagged stone was shown to be thinner and more regular. A thin, striated plate pitted with age, but still gleaming with verdant iridescent.

"This is one of the smaller spines of the neck," Castel said.

Derek looked nervously around and Castel though he must have enough imagination to see it now. The ridge that stretched up away from them in a steep, sinuous line. They were on his back, the back of the dormant and almost giant body of an extinct race. Castel shivered. There had been alliances, bonds, between the elves and the dragons once—before the dragons lost their world and most of them made war on humankind to seize their lands.

But in all the tales dragons were also spoken of as wise and just—right down to the Verdant Queen, Loralla, whose final battle with Salvradon led to both their deaths and the end of a majestic race.

Castel looked over the shabby building. He wondered what witch or mage the Knights planned to sacrifice and what was the point of taking the child? He cursed that he had not spoken more with Mendry before letting the man go. There were secrets between them that might lead to many deaths or one appalling return to life.

* * * *

Mendry was feeling coiled up inside, like before a battle. It was a strange sort of tension that took men different ways. You know something bad is coming and you can't escape. Some pray, some weep, some become calm with distant eyes and some are sure they are about to die. Mendry always

ended up feeling the same way—just cold inside like a stone and ready, if needs be, to die. He cupped an amulet of the Sun God in his palm and waited.

His grandfather opened the door with a smug, triumphant smile and Mendry felt a new sensation, slow-burning anger, kindling inside him. He stepped inside to find them all there, waiting. Father, grandfather, and four generations before that—even the oldest who he'd only seen twice before. The older Knights grew quiet with their age but watched with cruel, beady eyes like rats in the darkness. The door closed behind him with the finality of a coffin lid.

"Give me the child," Mendry said.

Every single one of them turned to him and laughed.

"A girl," his father sneered. "But it will have to do. We have waited a long time and cannot wait any longer."

"You cannot raise Salvradon without me. And the girl will do you no good—she is not mine."

Grandfather smiled. "Good of you to bring us so swiftly to the point," he sneered. "But do not think that I am fooled by your denials. We will return your bastard daughter to you. All you need to do is join us in the invocation."

"I am not going with you...."

"The Great One is here. Everything may be accomplished by dawn."

Mendry's eyes had been darting about the single room of the humble shack and finally he saw a plank crate in the corner and the tip of a tiny finger showing from within it. There was also a man in a dark robe, bound and lax upon the floor in the far corner—he could not spare the resources to

even wonder about that. Knowing that his options for escape were negligible, he took the only chance he saw and leapt for the babe.

He was barely an inch forward before his grandfather snatched him and threw him explosively back against the wall. The back of his head struck the unforgiving, rough logs of the wall, his teeth clashing together and his head struck numb. Mendry slumped to the floor with weak and numbed limbs.

"Your consent is not really a matter of concern to us. Once we are done you may take the mewling brat and be gone if Salvraddon is merciful enough to allow it ... not that the great dragon is know for such concessions."

The grim company of revenants chuckled with a sound like dry bones rubbing together. Father bent over him, gaping jaw revealing a row of jagged teeth. Mendry rolled onto his back and thrust the Sun amulet upwards.

A burning hiss cut the air and the rank scent of burnt flesh, but Father tossed the bauble aside with contempt. Holding Mendry's throat with his free hand, he held out his other arm. His robes fell back to show burn marks down his forearm, already healing.

"You are not pious enough to make that work." He looked down at Mendry and, incongruously, smiled quite tenderly.

Then he leaned down. Mendry made one last compulsive effort to get away, thrust against the packed soil of the ground with hands and feet, but his neck stayed pinned even as his body bucked. He strangled in his father's grasp, eyes thrown into darkness. Teeth thrust into his shoulder, grating

against the bone. Mendry could feel the infectious ichor oozing into his body.

Mendry called out hoarsely, pushing against his father, although his flesh gave no more than stone. Mendry's vision blurred and he felt a creeping paralysis fall over his body. He could barely see the hem of his father's robe sweep away from him.

With the last dregs of his strength Mendry rolled onto his side. Peering into what seemed like a fog falling from the ceiling, he saw his father bend in the corner and lift Sarah's child. The baby looked so small and pallid, her tiny limbs kicking listlessly.

"The child is not mine," his voice came out as little more than a breathless whisper. Desperately he repeated himself. "Not mine, not of our line."

Father turned to him. His face was paler, sharper than ever before, almost like some other creature was trying to burst out from within. One of the elders came to stand beside him. His face was inhumanly long with tiny deep set eyes and skin that seemed to glitter with green iridescence.

"Could it be true?" the elder muttered.

Father bowed slightly. "The boy has a distorted sense of honor. He lies to save the child."

"Save it? From immortality and power?"

Father shrugged. "He ran from such honors himself."

The eldest nodded and reached out, taking the baby. "I shall complete the circle. By midnight we will be ready."

Mendry's right arm was trapped under his body, his left trembled and as he tried to move it only his fingers twitched.

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His very tongue felt numb to the root, cold in his mouth and almost choking him. As his body escaped his control entirely, Mendry fell forward onto his front, his face crushed against the moldering floor.

Dimly he heard the child emit a sudden whimper. To be turned so young, what kind of monster had that poor girl been made into because of him? And worst of all he knew that Derek and Castel would now throw themselves into the midst of these monsters who were stronger even than he had remembered.

If only he had formed some better plan. If only he had never made friends with these unfortunates, the elf, the man, the girl-child and the woman who waited for her return.

Mendry struck down his fraying fears and scattered thoughts. So he would be one of them now, a Dragon Knight. As soon as he had the strength he would save the child. Mayhap Castel could do something for the little girl if he was quick enough. He was fairly sure the curse was not meant to go to those who were not full grown.

Mendry hadn't even the ability to close his eyes as he waited. 'Not pious enough' indeed.. Mendry prayed to every God whose name he could recall. *Let me die if I must, if it please you, but have mercy on the innocent. Give me the strength, give me the strength to....* And then the torpor of the change took him like the sucking waves of a deep, dark, cold and endless sea.

CHAPTER NINE

Derek fidgeted by his side. Castel found his fogged mind kept fixing on the rustle of cloth and scuff of displaced soil as his companion waited impatiently. Castel lay on his front, chin resting on the back of his hand. The peril of the situation warred with the fatigue of many days and far too much magic use in his depleted state.

His eyes drooped closed just for a moment and he experienced the compelling illusion of a heavy weight pressing down on his body. Each limb felt fragile and yet leaden as if he was sinking into the dark earth.

Blood warm and slick against her tongue. Salvraddon screamed his defiance, but already they are falling together, twined like lovers in the sickening embrace of the earth. Salvraddon's torn wings flare above them, blocking the sun, turning them so he is on top. So be it. If she must accompany Salvraddon into the void it was not too great a price.

A rough hand shook Castel's shoulder, overlaid across the feeling of the impact as two massive forms hit the soft earth driving them into it. Castel tried to open his eyes, to remember where he was....

With the force of the impact her jaw slammed closed upon the target, the soft flesh of the throat. Salvraddon's throat collapsed beneath her teeth. He rose, straddling her broken form and took one step before collapsing over her, heavy—so heavy.

Bodies torn and crushed subsided into decay. The earth settled over them with the slow tide of its own timescale, like

a blanket. On the horizon death stood, watching awhile, soon she would draw close. Loralla was content. There would be no more dragons. No more of their wisdom, no more of their evils—perhaps it was only fitting that she and he obliterate each other.

Castel's head swayed as his body was shaken violently. He lurched into wakefulness abruptly. Derek's hands were wound in his clothes, eyes wide.

"Wake up, elf. They are coming out. Mendry has failed."

"I was not..."

Castel forestalled any further protest; Derek was obviously not in the mood for a debate. And he seemed to be right. The sky was starting to darken and a line of robed figures was filing from the small structure. Two tall men emerged first, the first of them holding the newborn distastefully in extended arms. After them, two pairs of figures, each bearing a slumped form. The first was clearly Mendry. His unkempt hair hanging over face, a dark robe pulled haphazardly over his clothes and his booted feet dragging on the ground. The second dyad carried another person.

Castel squinted, fighting the blurring of his vision. The brown garb was of the Iseult and even at this distance he could see the form was female.

"That is unfortunate," Castel muttered.

"That seems like something of an understatement."

Castel glanced over at his acerbic companion. "They have captured an Iseult mage. Her sacrifice may well be sufficient to resurrect the dragon."

"I don't give a damn about the dragon. How do we get the babe?"

Castel looked back at the hollow before them. The two leading figures drove stakes into the ground in a rough circle, seven in total. The raising of torpid dragons was not something Castel ever had cause to study, but the basic principle was obvious enough.

They would need a number of living denizens native to this world, humans with a link to the dragon, and they would need a great quantity of magical energy—such as that which would be released when a witch was killed. They would have some form of ritual guide the energy to the dragon and its followers giving the dragon the power to rise and, through its minions, the power to continue to live in the human world.

Derek might be most concerned for the child—and indeed a child was always to be protected—but if Salvradon was allowed to rise the toll of deaths would quickly escalate. The Verdant Queen's sacrifice would be for nothing.

It is not too late, child of summer.

And the Verdant Queen spent the last of her strength to pass on a desperate, last ditch plan.

* * * *

Everything was bright, glaring bright, but the pearly sky was pierced with stars—could it truly be night? The faint mew of a child broke through his confusion. Mendry struggled to get his feet planted.

"Good," his father said. "Time is short. The Iseult draw close."

Mendry kept his balance, barely, as the two Knights stepped back from him. Flames crackled at his back and a circle of pitch-soaked stakes marked out a rough circle of bare ground. The other Knights each stood beside a stake, except for his father who went to take Sarah's child from grandfather.

A woman lay bound and motionless at the center of this space. Mendry spared her a moment's thought, but then dismissed her. Even if the woman still lived, the child was his priority and he would be lucky to save her and must brook no distraction. By her side lay a vellum scroll, weighted by a large pebble and by its side a peasant cup.

Mendry clenched his fists, feeling weakness even in his fingers. He looked for his chance.

His father held the child casually in the crook of one arm as he bent to the ground and lifted the rough clay chalice.

"What is that?" Mendry rasped.

"It is your blood, fresh turned, boy. All we need to make our seventh and finally complete the pact."

And so there was no more time. Given that the child was not his, the tainted blood would harm her, perhaps kill her outright. Mendry took one shallow breath and stumbled forward. "You will not..."

Time seemed to move so slowly, the air parting like honey as he moved; a dark drop fell from the lip of the cup and splashed upon the baby's pallid cheek. Mendry reached out his hands, fingers curled to grasp her, even as a second drop fell neatly into her tiny mouth.

Father let him snatch the child away and simply laughed. "It matters not where she is now. Now there are seven and the dragon is bonded to them from the moment He is raised."

Mendry stumbled back. The child wiggled feebly in his grasp. His eyes fixed on his father's gloating face, he stepped back again, moving slowly from their circle into the deepening night.

Behind him he heard thrashing and breaking branches. Instinctively he glanced behind and saw Derek scrambling down the long, steep slope of the scrubby hillside. The Knights paid them no heed.

Grandfather raised the parchment, flapping it in a swift rising breeze, and began to chant in a high, unintelligible voice that cut through the air like a razor. Mendry turned and thrust the child at Derek who arrived out of breath.

"Take her to the Iseult, quickly."

Derek took the child, but clumsily grasped Mendry's sleeve. "The elf said they would let you both go now and we must go swiftly before the dragon is raised."

"Where is he, where is Castel?"

"He has already gone to find the Iseult."

Mendry had led a long life that had trained his ear for lies and that was a clear one. Wherever Castel had gone it was not to safety. Mendry did not bother to debate it; he thrust Derek away as strongly as he dared for the child's safety. "Go. I will follow soon." He certainly hoped that was true.

* * * *

Five Knights formed the circle, outstretched arms almost touching, and the air crackled with anticipation. Castel approached carefully. Most elves would have seen him easily, but to human, dusk-dimmed eyes his care was close enough to stealth. When the blood was fed to the child Castel gritted his teeth, but did nothing. But it deepened his resolve. The effects of the blood would be hard on her and on Mendry—and now it had taken hold in his mature form the transformation could not be undone—but it could somehow be borne.

If the dragon was raised they were all doomed. For all that the Knights seemed to think they would somehow rule or share power with the dragon they raised, the truth was they would be most abject slaves and once the dragon had life and blood again, they would be a most disposable asset.

To see Mendry, to see the child suffer such a fate—no, it could not be allowed. And then there was the rather ironic role of the Iseult: Thrudge lay at the centre of the invocation circle.

Castel would wait for a moment when a reckless or foolish man might think he had a chance. The very moment when the sacrifice was about to be made all the threads of fate and incantation twisted into a single cord. A single cord that, if he had his strength, he could have cut. But Castel's body felt as cold and empty as a corpse. He did not have the strength to break the working, even at that, it's most vulnerable point. He was forced to take a great chance and follow Loralla's plan for all that it was not an entirely selfless suggestion on her part and the risks were great.

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He saw Mendry grab the child and hand her over to her uncle. Castel willed Mendry to leave—he would only disrupt a plan that had slim enough hope of success. But there was not aether to bind the wish and Mendry wavered and turned back toward his kin. With clan like this no wonder he had become such a solitary creature.

Mendry's eyes skated over the scene, searching for something and fixed on the prone woman. The Knight that seemed to lead the coterie stooped and pushed Thrudge onto her back. She lolled, alive but somehow paralyzed or drugged.

The older Knight's piercing voice rose into a crescendo, but it was casually, without any flourish, that the leader pulled a simple, cast-iron dagger from his belt and positioned to strike down at the helpless woman.

Castel leapt from cover, his heart thumping. In a few swift steps he crossed the distance and grabbed the Knight's dagger arm. There was no need to hold back in order to achieve his goal—the dragon-blooded man was swift and stronger than him by far.

Mendry called out an inarticulate warning, but his kin restrained him with ease. Castel felt a hand, cool and unyielding as stone, encircle his arm and thrust him, sprawling backward, over the Iseult's prone form.

The blade descended so quickly he didn't even see it. It parted his skin and flesh, with a swift, smooth intrusion, to the heart. Castel didn't fight it. His eyes stayed open, unseeing.

He fell.

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Through his body, down and down into darkness. In a warm flash, like a flower opening, she told him everything. In a single moment that unfolded its petal and revealed its heart, but then folded back, magically, into a tight, hard, bud.

Child of Summer. You know that there was a time of dragons, but it was an older time than you, or any man, could know. The land, this land, gave birth to our race. Slow to grow, rare in quickening, our numbers were always small, our lives were long and our minds hungry for knowledge and connection.

One of our kind learned to travel as far as our thoughts could carry us and the talent quickly passed to most dragons. Restless and limited, the cage door was opened and we flew outward to the stars. It became our quest to find others—others who we could speak to and learn from—the dragons were never many but surely out there, somewhere, there would be other races, other minds.

A few stayed behind. Some could not learn the mind's flight and so were trapped within the prison of this world's sky, and there were those whose love of home was greater than their greed for experience. Salvradon was one who never learned; myself and my two sisters were those who never yearned to leave.

We four watched and witnessed the great irony. The only race we ever found whose minds rose and developed to resemble in some way our own were the hairy little beasts that became men and women. My sisters and I began to speak to humans, those who seemed ready for that discourse. Their closeness to us began to change them. Our presence,

what you would call magic, turned them into your kind. The elves. The humans' own magic developed afterward and I have never known if it is truly theirs or a wild strain of that which came from us....

Salvraddon, on the other hand, took notice of men only when they began to encroach upon his wide and rugged domain and his response was to make them slaves. He gave them his blood and it also changed them, it made them monsters.

Salvraddon's taint mixed with a single human lineage and your magics give us this chance, this one chance. Their blood and will reached for Salvraddon, but you, your heart, your will, can reach for me.

The darkness roared. He was out there, in there, Salvraddon, hungry and impatient. All of the darkness was Salvraddon and his foully plotted plans. And in the maw of that darkness there flickered a single, opportunistic light.

Castel's mind whirled. He was strangely unconcerned with his own death, perhaps it had already happened and this was the last fading thoughts of a doomed spirit. He saw the story, the vision laid out before him. Elves had been, were, humans? But they came from Underhill, another land...

We knew our time was growing short. Our brethren came back less often and no new dragons were being born. Our time was short and the elves had grown dependent on our magic, so we found and adapted a place for them, a place where magical energies were stronger than here. But even so we instructed them that these energies would have to be conserved, spread evenly throughout all the people who had

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followed us and in their own way become as hungry and as incomplete as Salvradon's blood drinking thralls. Under the pressure of these requirements their culture changed and adapted. Monogamy became a perversion, community bonds an imperative. But child, your time now is short.

Reach out for me and we may both yet live.

The light flickered. It bloomed, it opened and reaching out, Castel grasped it.

CHAPTER TEN

Mendry screamed. Even before the strike was made, even if he had been free to move, there would not have been time. He knew this even as he clawed his way toward his father and...

Castel seemed not even to struggle. He was looking up at the blade as it descended, biting with deft accuracy into his frail body. Blood spurted upward, spraying across the Dragon Knight's pale, impassive face. Mendry lost sight of them for a moment as he somehow broke free. Perhaps the other Knight simply let him go, knowing it was too late to thwart their plan. The spell had been spoken, the sacrifice made.

Father stepped away; leaving Castel's body sprawled over the robed female like some discarded doll. The iron dagger was still buried to the hilt in his chest. Mendry's knees gave way. Castel's eyes were slitted, showing only white. Mendry struggled to know, to really know, that this had happened.

Numb resolution filled the void of his disbelief. Derek and the child must be far enough away from here now. Mendry's hands curled around the dagger blade and slowly he drew it out. Castel made not the slightest movement, his lips already faintly blue. Love, happiness, a cozy, little family—that was never really destined to be an assassin's lot. Mendry looked up to his father and embraced the only option he had left. Vengeance, and faint hope even of that.

Mendry stood to face his father. The old man just laughed. It all churned within Mendry, muted grief, rage, guilt and the stale blood of the dragon. He stepped forward and drove the

dagger up toward his father's stomach, an attack without any pretence or subtlety.

The ground shivered under his feet as he pressed to summon up the full force of his exhausted body. His father held out one hand, cold and hard as stone, obviously expecting to thwart the strike easily. As they crashed together, the Knight was forced to step back. He gripped Mendry's wrist firmly and met his eyes—stopping the blade within a finger's breadth of his stomach

'You are no match for me, boy. Let the blood work on you awhile and you'll see that this is futile—and join us.'

Mendry dug his heels into the pliable ground and drove his weapon on with all the will and strength that he could muster. He let his father's smug assurance stoke his own kindling rage. No strategy, no speech and no games.

His father's eye widened to realize that, albeit only by a tiny fraction, Mendry was moving the blade closer—a magic blade meant to pierce any flesh. The ground lurched and they both stumbled, Mendry pushing his father a step backward again. Incredulous that he was not already dead, a tiny hope kindled, giving him more strength. If he could only prevail, wipe from the earth the sire who cursed his blood, end this quest to raise the dragon even if he must die to do it—what was there to live for now?

A rending, tearing sound echoed through the earth. His father's eyes darted over Mendry's shoulder. "The dragon is coming," he said. "Give this up now and you may yet serve him."

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With the last of his strength Mendry reached forward his free hand and grabbed his father by the throat. The flesh seemed strangely pliable beneath his fingers. He drove the dagger up, grinding it through the flesh of the abdomen and up under the ribs. He looked into his fathers eyes and saw nothing there but blank surprise before the ground exploded up around them.

Mendry was buffeted aside. A hard, white pillar with a broken end thrust up through the torn sod. It looked like a giant bone. The ground humped upward and Mendry rolled uncontrollably down the slope as it grew steeper. He hit the side of the old shack just as it crumpled and fell away from him. Dust billowed upward in pale veils against the dark sky.

Then, amidst the chaos and destruction, a single sinuous form tore through the ground and reared up into the sky. Skeletally thin, a monstrous creature with a narrow pointed head upon a swan-like neck. Its twin golden eyes glowed visibly in the darkness. The dragon, for it could be nothing else, was larger even than Mendry had imagined—towering into the sky. It's head as large as the building he had just been inside, its neck as wide and long as the oldest trees of the forest. Its ragged wings ripped forth from the earth and its neck swayed as it reached and plucked two objects from the rubble.

Mendry's grandfather staggered from the torn hillside, his face streaked with dull blood. "Our victory is at hand!" he rasped.

But even as he spoke his own skin split across his cheek and forehead, the flesh beneath crumbling away to reveal

bone. He staggered; decaying hands rose to his mutilated face and he collapsed, slowly, his knees shattering as the weight of his body hit them.

Mendry rose to his feet, his heart beating in the slow tattoo he had not felt since last taking to a mass battlefield. It was the calm a man only found in the depths of fear, when no more fear could be felt. He turned to the dragon.

"Salvradon," he whispered.

The great beast turned to him, as if it had heard this tiny sound amidst the carnage and in a low but tuneful voice it replied. "Do you follow Salvradon?"

Mendry raised his bloodied dagger and shouted his defiance in a dust-choked cry. "I do not!"

The dragon's head swayed back. Its forelimbs were clutched tight to its chest, hand-like extremities clenched. Mendry waited for the monster to strike, but it seemed only to look over his head.

"That is good," it said, and the more he heard it the more the voice seemed warm and free of threat.

It lifted one hand and spread open the fingers, but from below Mendry could not see what it held. The dragon gazed at its own hand for a long moment and then he saw the dragon emit a breath and pearly vapor billowed into the air.

The dragon half closed its fingers and then very carefully leaned forwards and tipped its burden onto the ground at Mendry's feet. It was Castel, lax, but moving his limbs sluggishly. The elf curled his body and raised his head weakly, blinking. Mendry leapt to his side. His questing hand found warmth, and life, and beneath the torn clothing no trace of a

wound. He dragged Castel backward and clear as the beast shook itself fully loose from its erstwhile grave—revealing long hind legs and a whip-thin tail, almost like a rat's albeit on a mighty scale.

Of the Knights of Salvradon there was no sign, save for the rags and dust that blew across the scene. Mendry could make no sense of it and ceased trying. Mendry curled his arms around Castel, clutched his clothing in tight fists and held onto him. Alive, together, come what may.

* * * *

The dragon lay upon the hillside like a butterfly just come from its chrysalis, wings fanning the night air that was growing cold. Castel lay in Mendry's crushing embrace and struggled to explain.

"Loralla, another dragon. I didn't have any time to tell you—it was the only way..."

Clearly Mendry could not catch his meaning from such scattered fragments, but there was no time to explain from the beginning and in full. Loralla was weak. Brought back to life, but only slowly recouping her energy. But she must also sense them, feel them coming.

And indeed they were here. A human figure burst upon them, the Iseult, Tirus, wide-eyed.

"You have done it. I knew you elves were in league with them." He seemed caught between rage and fear to see the dragon. He reached toward them both with hands wreathed in fire. Castel felt himself plucked out of the way as Mendry wrenched them both to their feet.

"I think you need to calm down and find out what is really going on," Mendry said in a soft voice.

Tirus just pointed toward them with a long, shaking finger. "I know what is going on. The elves have always followed dragons; the oldest of tales say so. I knew from the beginning we should have finished him."

His ranting seemed to draw the great dragon's attention, even as an older Iseult staggered to join them. The ground creaked as the dragon moved herself with laborious care to regard them.

"This elf is not yours," she said implacably. "You will not touch him. But this one..." She opened her other great hand-like paw and revealed the groggy form of the robed woman. "This one is yours and I return her to you."

Tirus looked on with wild eyes as his colleague was dropped at his feet. "I will not allow this!" he shouted, sounding more like a petulant child than a mage. "Men defeated the dragon tyrants and I will not allow them to return."

Cleridge tried to restrain him. "Tirus, we do not know what it..."

Tirus merely shook him off. "It is still weak. This may be my only chance, our only chance to avoid calamity."

He gestured with his hands and poured forth a bright stream of flames that hit the underside of the dragon's head and flowed over her skin like water. After a few moments he lowered his arms, panting and swaying where he stood. Everyone looked to the dragon.

She blinked slowly, turned to look down at Castel and blinked again. Finally she said, "I tire of this, do you come with me, or stay here ... with these rather volatile witches."

Castel looked to Mendry, who shook his head as if to say he hadn't any notion of what to do.

Castel looked at the Iseult, the destroyed hillside, the dragon ... and said, "we go with you, my lady Loralla."

The dragon reached out her hands and scooped them up like a large man might snatch up a kitten. In the dark jumble of her grip Castel held tight onto Mendry and felt the lurch as they took to the sky.

* * * *

Mendry had already faced the worst thing he could imagine happening and he had been delivered from it. Being borne aloft by a dragon no longer seemed something worthy of great fear. He felt the scattered digits banding around their bodies firmly—and then being held close against the beast's bony keel. At first they jerked with each labored wing beat, but then she seemed to reach a smooth soar, perhaps riding the winds. It was freezing cold and he knew they could not stand it long. But then with a lurch they twisted and there was a sensation of falling and a sickening lurch. It was clear they had landed again.

The dragon released them with ginger care. They stood in the darkness of a stretch of road. The air was split by the sound of a crying baby and before them two mules balked with rolling eyes, behind them a large cart. Derek held the

reins loosely and by his side Sarah held the bundled child. Both were gaping at the sight before them.

Castel smoothed his bloodied clothes and looked to Mendry as if expecting him to know what to say in a situation like this.

"Um."

It was the dragon that spoke first. "I mean to go into the mountains to rest now. And I must speak again to the child of summer and see also this child who has been given Salvraddon's blood. Given her age the taint may yet be removed from her." Sarah's face grew taut with added worry. "If you come with me you might lack comforts. I mean to find a place where men will not encounter me, wild places."

Mendry found it increasingly easy to think of this beast as a real ... woman. He squinted up at her. "I do not think you can drop us with Master Derek here, we are not on the easiest of terms."

Derek rubbed one hand over his head, feeling his sister's eyes upon him. "The nature of our dispute is that you are an assassin. I wonder if you might be considering giving up that career. Things have ... changed perhaps."

And Mendry had to admit they had. Having seen the goals his family had pursued so long, and seen them fail, why was he clinging to their ways?

"We could discuss that, Derek. Things are rather ... up in the air right now."

He noticed the small birdcage propped up behind the carts driving seat, from which a pair of beady eyes were peering.

"I see Rufus is coming along."

Derek blushed. "He was too tame to leave behind. He wouldn't last long."

The dragon stepped back one long pace, raising eddies of wind. "I will seek you out when I am stronger. Look for me child of summer, for we must talk."

She turned in one sinuous movement and for all her size quite flowed down the road ahead of them before snapping open her enormous wings and launching into the air. The wind driven in the wake of her wing beats blinded them with dust and sand. They all watched until she was a distant pale figure, mistakable for nothing more than a trick of the moonlight.

"I'm pleased to meet up with you, anyway," Derek said. "I went to your room and brought along the few things of value I found, including the rather significant trove of coins hidden, of all the most predictable places, under the mattress. Nothing would have lasted long once the building was empty, but if I hadn't come across you I suppose that would make me a thief."

"Gods forbid that I would find myself in such low company," Mendry replied.

There was a single brittle moment before Derek smiled. "There is some bedding in the back if you want to climb on up."

"We were just arguing about were to go," Sarah said. "And there are some explanations owed all around, but that can wait. The both of you look set to fall if you don't rest."

Mendry sighed gratefully. He put his arm around Castel's narrow shoulders and together they went around to the

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backboard. It was an easy matter to spread out a quilt and settle themselves on the floor. They jolted on down the road, but Mendry pulled Castel in close and rested his head upon his own upper arm. Exhaustion descended over him and Castel lay limp and spent against him, both in their stiff, soiled clothes.

He could dimly hear Sarah speaking to her brother. "I feel better with them here," she whispered.

"With all that happened to your child..." he replied.

"And I'll know the full story on that bright and early in the morning, but I also know they'd die for her and that makes them family."

There was a finality in Sarah's voice that Derek did not venture to contradict, maybe he didn't disagree.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Mendry sighed as he set down the brush and surveyed the freshly white-washed window of the store. Sarah was sorting through the basic stocks they had carried with them and Derek was out at the market getting ingredients for the kinds of potions that might be in demand in a small, seafront village: balm against the drying wind, wound powder, teething drafts. The store itself was two stone rooms and a kitchen out back with a wooded storefront facing the main road between the village proper and the dock. Mendry's accrued coin had bought it, once Derek had been hustled past his concern over 'blood money'. If herbs and potions would not do they could stock other sundries fresh from locals or durables brought in from the town, there was no general store in the village.

Rufus hung in his cage. The plump rodent had chewed a hole in one side of it, but rarely ventured out so long as food and water were to be had within. Mendry had to admit he was getting used to having the animal around. Once you got on talking terms with a dragon, a rat was no obstacle.

The late afternoon sun was beating down warm and the fishing boats were coming in. Gulls cried and women shouted ribald greetings to the men coming in. Mendry turned from that scene to see Castel coming on down the road, the baby, Rosella, in a sling across his chest. They met Loralla once in a while, up in the crags overlooking the sea, and she was confident that the child would slough off the tainted blood and

grow up healthy—with a little help from a more wholesome sort of dragon-magic.

Mendry had not been so fortunate. The blood had taken hold of him, but Castel and Loralla both told him that, so long as he refrained from consummating the bond by drinking human blood, the effects would be mild.

The stoic locals could not help but glimpse Loralla occasionally, but the only noticeable response had been the occasional reference to 'our dragon' as if she had always been there. Some places have long memories.

Castel waved as he approached and turned into the shop, brushing a kiss on Mendry's cheek as he went by. He was different these days. Some strength he drew from the dragon made him less tired and more beautiful. Mendry half expected this new dazzling creature to cast him aside, yet every gesture and word was still Castel, his Castle with the crooked smile and knowing eyes.

People started straggling up from the boats, coming past the shop and calling out greetings to the new arrivals as they went. They were, on the whole, open-faced and happy folk here.

Sarah was unbanking the cooking fire when Derek arrived back laden down with string net bags and a big bunch of root vegetables in his hand, whilst Mendry found himself standing on the threshold watching the sunset kindle.

"Happiness isn't everything," Derek reminded him as he went inside.

"It'll do," Mendry replied. "It'll do."

—End—

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