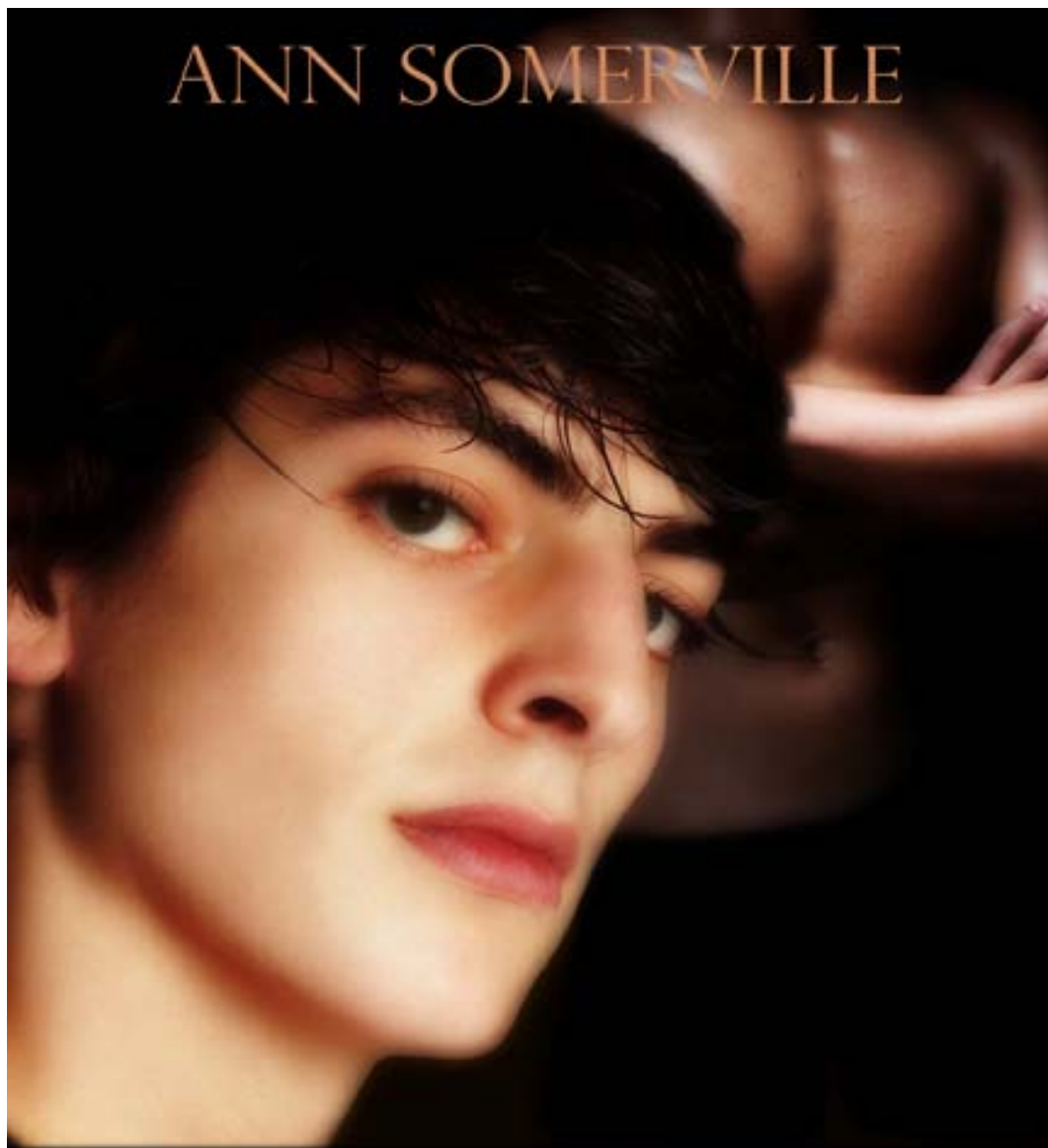


ANN SOMERVILLE



MANY ROADS
HOME

SADDHAIN publishing, Ltd.

No trust without truth.

Fleeing his murderous brother-in-law, Vicont Yveni, heir to the Duchy of Sardelsa, seeks safety abroad until he can reclaim his birthright. Instead he ends up shipwrecked, captured and taken to the one country where he dare not reveal his identity. Worse, he's just been bought by a man with no love for Sardelsa.

Ripped from his family as a child and sold into slavery, Paole's natural gift for healing made him a valuable asset but did little to shield him from abuse and prejudice. Though he's now free, for the first time in his life he's alone—and he hates it. All he wanted was an apprentice and traveling companion in this hostile land. Instead he winds up the unintentional owner of a slave with a mulish attitude...and a suspicious history.

Yveni dares not tell the truth about who he is, and Paole refuses to trust him until he comes clean. The battle of wills only serves to heat up a sizzling attraction that throws a new complication into the mix: love.

Paole wants acceptance. Yveni wants his birthright. Even if they manage to come to an understanding, forces are gathering against them that could tear them apart forever...

Warning: Virginal angsting, interminable UST, and tender loving.

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Many Roads Home

Ann Somerville

Dedication

To my beloved Pauls, Sam, Masha, Susan, Katie and Mim, for their help and support not just with this but so much of my writing.

Prologue

The only sound in the cabin now was the rattle of Mathias's breathing. The fire in the hearth had died down to little more than embers some time ago. Paole could have gone over and built it up, but the old man wouldn't release his hand, and Paole couldn't deny him this small comfort for the sake of a warmer fire.

Mathias strained to lift his head a little from the pillow. "Tonight, my boy? You're sure?"

"Yes, master." Exactly when, Paole didn't know, but the old man's lungs were filling with fluid, and his aged heart laboured. Some time in the next few hours, it would fail. Mathias had made Paole tell him this fact, though he hadn't wanted to. Most people didn't want to know. Mathias wasn't most people.

He sighed and lay back. "Good. I'm tired of being old and sick. Sorry to leave you alone, Paole. It's a hard world out there for one like you."

"Don't worry about me. I've managed until now."

"But never on your own." He lifted a shaking hand and patted Paole on the cheek. "One thing left to do." He paused to suck in more air, struggling against his failing lungs. "On the desk. A wooden box. With the leaf pattern. Bring it?"

Paole fetched it. It had been part of his master's desk furniture for so long, his eyes no longer noted it whenever he walked past. He'd learned a very long time ago, and very painfully, that masters didn't like slaves who poked into their private affairs. He'd never been tempted to touch anything on the desk.

"Take out the letters on the top." Paole obeyed, but still didn't attempt to scan the contents of the documents as he handed them over. Mathias pushed them back. "No, they're for you. Forgive me."

Puzzled, for he had no idea what his master could need forgiveness for, he read the ornate hand of a lawyer in Kivnic. They'd last been there more than six months ago—his master had prepared this back then?

He looked up and stared into Mathias's rheumy eyes. "Why didn't you tell me?"

Mathias coughed with heartbreaking effort. Paole, long practice making it easy, lifted him up and wiped his mouth. Mathias's breathing was a little worse when he finished.

"I...wanted to be sure you'd be free when I died. But I couldn't bear to part with you either." He closed his eyes. "I have loved you these ten years as my son, Paole. I'm giving you all I have, but it's not enough." He coughed again, in a long and tiring fit. His face flushed with effort but then returned to the fragile, bloodless state that so clearly spoke of his great age. "Can you forgive me...for not telling you?"

"Easily, mas...Mathias."

The old man smiled. "I'm glad to hear you call me that," he whispered. "Don't live out here alone. Use your gift, continue the work. Go home if you want."

"I have no home," Paole said simply. "None but this."

"Now it's yours. Build the fire...stay with me."

So Paole did, holding Mathias's hand, easing the coughing that grew less frequent, listening to the breathing change, feeling the pulse weaken. Seeing with his gift the internal changes as Mathias's body slowly gave up the fight to keep the old man going.

A little after midnight everything went quiet, and the faint throb at Mathias's wrist stilled forever. Paole bowed his head, unsure of how he felt. Mathias had always been kind, and had taught him the craft of medicine and healing. But...he'd always been the master, and Paole could never release the distrust in his heart for those in that position.

He stripped the old man's skinny body and covered him with the shroud prepared years before. Tomorrow he would lay Mathias in the coffin in the woodshed, to await the spring and the softened ground. Tonight Mathias would rest a final time in his bed, now Paole's.

He threw more wood on the fire, wrapped himself in a blanket and sat in the armchair. He'd keep a vigil until dawn, the only way to pay respects he knew. As the fire burned down over the long hours, he could put a name to one emotion in his heart.

Loneliness.

Chapter One

“That hostel has rooms.” Gerd pointed at a large brick and wooden building wedged tight between a clothing shop and a vintners. “Looks respectable. Let’s give it a try.”

Yveni nodded. He didn’t care where they slept. He wanted to be clear of Nukin port and Sardelsa so the pain in his heart could be amputated cleanly. Until they left the duchy he loved and was born to rule, his grief was ground open afresh every day.

They were flush with ready money. Not only had Gil given them a generous stash, they’d also sold their horses for a good price at the hostelry. No need for the mounts any longer. They had to pay for accommodation and passage on a ship to Horches, but that should still leave them with funds to spare.

Another matter that held little interest for Yveni. After the frantic scramble to leave the castle and the fear of being caught as the two of them fled across Sardelsa to the coast, he only felt numb. The risk of discovery was slim now he’d changed clothes and Gerd had crudely cut his hair short, more befitting the son of a trader as he pretended to be rather than the vicont he really was. Or had been.

At the hostel, Gerd dealt with renting them a room with meals supplied for the next couple of days. Yveni stared around the hostel with some curiosity since he’d never been in such an establishment. He had no idea what a hostel room even looked like, or what facilities would be found here. The hostel looked clean enough, though far from luxurious. Not as welcoming as Gil and Sofia’s home, but it would do.

His throat seized as he saw a portrait of his father, draped in mourning white and ducal blue, high on a wall in a place of honour. Flowers had been placed on a small table below it, clearly from subjects lamenting the loss of their beloved grand duc. Official mourning hadn’t yet ended. Yveni hadn’t even been given time to grieve properly. Though his father had been failing for months, the final illness had been rapid and a shock to all the children. Yveni still couldn’t believe he was now an orphan.

Father, I miss you. His eyes filled but he quickly wiped them dry. Though Grand Duc Arkady had been deeply and sincerely mourned, to stand weeping before his portrait was too dramatic for a humble subject.

“Come along, Gaelin,” Gerd called to his “son”.

Yveni shouldered his pack and obediently followed his “father” up two flights of narrow stairs. Gerd opened a door at the end of a dingy corridor and went in.

Yveni stood still at the doorway, blinking. “This is *it*?” he whispered in horror.

“Come inside, boy,” Gerd snapped. He waited until Yveni obeyed and closed the door before coming to him and speaking in a low voice. “This is standard accommodation for traders.”

“But it’s tiny.” The room contained only a washbasin and mirror, two bunk beds, and two chairs at a tiny table. Miserly grey paint covered the walls, and the sunlight struggled to enter the single grimy little window. It looked more like a barn than a bedroom. At least the bare floor was swept.

“Good enough for the likes of us.” Gerd lowered his voice further. “The walls are thin, and the ducal authorities are searching for you. I saw a note on the receptionist’s desk with your description. Fortunately they don’t know who you’re with and there are many Tueler youths who look much as you do, but we can’t afford to be careless, ‘Gaelin’.”

Yveni nodded. “I understand, father.”

Gerd patted his shoulder. “Stay here, rest. There’s a privy and washroom on each floor. Make sure you hide the you-know-what,” he added in a whisper, indicating on his own arm the place where the familial tattoo sat on Yveni’s. Yveni had covered it with a bandage, and would claim to be hiding a burn if asked. “I’ll take our papers and book the passage. Supper’s in the dining room here.”

“Yes, father.”

“Don’t let anyone in. Keep the door locked. I’ll knock like this.” He tapped out a quick double beat. “And cheer up, lad. It could be worse.”

Yveni couldn’t even raise a smile. It could be worse, for sure, but Gerd wasn’t on the run from his murderous nearly brother-in-law, or about to be stateless for the next three years.

He wished Gerd had taken him on the errand, because being alone gave him too much time to think. Too much time to miss his sisters, Olana and Serina, and his friends Gil, his wife Sofia and their sons. To worry about them too. Serina’s betrothed, the Margrave Konsatin, couldn’t harm her if he wanted to retain his right to the regency, but little Olana’s position was by no means so secure. Serina and Olana would have to depend on Gil, but a vengeful Konsatin could easily threaten Gil’s position as huntmaster. They’d been very careful not to leave a trail back to Gil, but there weren’t that many people in the castle both willing and able to arrange for the heir to vanish on one of his daily horse rides.

All would depend on whether Konsatin believed that Yveni had been kidnapped, or fled for his own reasons. Gil had assured Yveni he could take care of himself and his family. Sofia’s Seer ability would give them some warning of anything Konsatin might do, but if they had to flee suddenly, they’d lose everything. And unlike Yveni, they couldn’t return in three years to reclaim Gil’s position.

He rubbed his face with his sleeve, disgusted with his self-pity. So many had sacrificed their safety to help him, and yet he whined like a child. Better that Sardelsa had a corrupt and greedy regent than a spineless, weepy grand duc. His father would be ashamed of him. No, he would cry no more. His parents in the spirit world wouldn’t have to watch their son behaving like a snivelling cur. *I love you*, he told them. *I’ll make you proud.*

Gerd returned within the hour and switched on the main light as Yveni let him in. “Why are you sitting in the dark, lad?”

“Nothing to read, no need for it.”

Gerd grunted. “Thought that might be your problem. We’ve to amuse ourselves for three days before the ship leaves, so I bought some cheap books. They do a good trade in second-hand items here in Nukin.”

“Second-hand?” Yveni frowned. He’d never heard the term before.

“Sold for cash, bought discounted. Like the horses.” Gerd grinned. “I guess the idea’s a new one to you. Here you go.”

Yveni took the slightly grubby books from him. The large and rather ugly typeset was printed on crude paper. The front cover showed a woman with a rather improbable bosom and a man either trying to undress her or begging her to cover up. It wasn’t clear, since the illustration was smudged and worn.

“People read such things?”

“Oh yes. Very popular. In a town like this with people coming and going, they’re traded all the time.”

“But they don’t look very improving.”

“Don’t know about that, my lad, but they’re entertaining. Read or don’t read, up to you. But since you’ll have to stay here,” he added in a low voice, “you best take what you can.” He took papers out of his satchel. “Two tickets to Horches. Two and a half week journey. Hope you don’t get seasick.”

“I have no idea. I’ve never been on a boat.”

“Ah. Oh well, too late to complain now. Are you hungry?”

The next few days held nothing but tedium for Yveni, and if it hadn’t been for the horrible little books Gerd had bought, he’d have gone mad from boredom. The books had no redeeming value whatsoever, and the fantastical and implausible stories of great adventurers, grateful women of loose morals, and monsters of every type were written in a highly vulgar manner. But they served to distract Yveni from his thoughts and pass the time well enough. Other than the books and visiting the dining room three times a day for plentiful but rather stodgy meals, there was nothing else to do. He couldn’t talk to Gerd about Gerd’s fascinating if unsavoury history because of the risk of being overheard, and he couldn’t commit his thoughts to writing for fear of discovery. It would be better on the boat, Gerd said. Yveni hoped so.

Gerd could go about freely, and with the new supplies of books, he brought news—what there was of it. The disappearance of the heir to the duchy of Sardelsa still caused a huge stir, and feverish theories filled the newssheets, along with stern messages from His Grace, the Regent Konsatin, that the perpetrators of this foul crime would be found and severely punished. Gerd brought several of the newssheets back to the hostel for Yveni to read, and Yveni took great pleasure in stabbing his knife right through Konsatin’s hypocritical words.

Of his sisters, there was no news, other than a court-issued statement from Her Grace, the Vicontes Serina, that she placed every faith in her betrothed, the regent, to find the man or men who had so brutally

stolen her beloved brother from them. Serina would certainly have torn up such tripe offered for her approval rather than authorise it. But her authorisation wasn't needed, not with Konsatin in such tight control.

Yveni only had to survive until he turned twenty-one, and return to claim the ducal throne. But the obstacles to his return were formidable. Sofia's gift could only see four days into the future. He would have given anything if she could have told him what the next three years would bring.

The dull wet weather on their day of departure fitted Yveni's gloomy mood. The ship was to sail at noon, allowing plenty of time for breakfast and a leisurely checkout from the unloved little room. Yveni was glad to leave it and the hostel behind, hopefully forever. Gerd thought they could risk a short stroll for Yveni to stretch his legs and see something of the port before they left, so long as he spoke little and played the simpleton.

While he relished the chance to absorb the sights and sounds and distinctly odd smells of the port town, his heart ached to see his father's hand in so much of this city. The grand duc had left his mark not only on his castle with its extensive telephonic and electrical systems and brand new plumbing, but on the society too. Electrification had been carried out in almost every town, telegraph stations and telephone exchanges installed in every county, every village, and new schools, infirmaries and libraries built with the most up-to-date equipment and much of it bought with the duc's personal fortune. Nukin had benefited like the rest from the modernisation, and Yveni's fist clenched as he passed a postal-service store. The service had been established just a year ago and had rapidly spread to the rest of the duchies in the Unity. In the window of the store, his father's portrait stood, draped in white and blue, and as Yveni watched, several people stopped and bowed their heads in respect.

All he'd wanted to do with his life was to have a chance to work on these great projects with his father while he lived, and to carry them on after he died. Fat chance of Konsatin doing anything like that. He'd said all the right things when he'd come for the betrothal and pretended to be interested in modernisation, but his home in the duchy of Enholt was backward and rigidly formal, and Konsatin's brother, the duc of Enholt, refused to allow telephones even in his palace. The only hope was that the people, now used to these modern services, would not easily allow Konsatin to remove them. If they did, Yveni would have a huge task ahead of him on his return.

Gerd touched his shoulder. "Gaelin, we have to go. There are a couple of things I need to buy."

"Yes, father." But his eyes lingered a moment or two longer on the beloved face of his real father. Gods, he missed his family.

Gerd purchased food, which made sense, and a curious-looking belt for Yveni, which did not.

"I already have a belt," Yveni said as they walked down to the docks to board.

"Not like this. Wait and I'll show you."

The purser took a long time to examine their papers and tickets. Gerd picked his teeth and appeared unconcerned despite the close scrutiny of two soldiers. Yveni stared into space and hoped he looked vacantly stupid—as little like a missing vicont as possible.

But finally the purser waved them on board with a grunt, and at the top of the gangplank, a sailor, raggedly dressed in short trousers and a perfectly disgusting bandana around his neck, examined their tickets and told them how to find their cabin. The ship was principally a cargo vessel so there were only a dozen passengers on board, though there were over forty crewmembers. Yveni wouldn't have known the difference between one kind of ship or another. He was simply fascinated by all the strange shiny equipment and the sailors working at the huge sails and with ropes as thick as Yveni's forearm. The very motion of the boat as wash slapped against its hull was new and beguiling to him, though the odours from the murky water in the dock enticed him less.

Gerd urged him to stop moongazing and to move along the deck to their cabin which, to Yveni's relief, turned out to be less worn than the hostel room, with more storage. Bunk beds again, but private washing and toileting facilities offered more privacy.

Gerd claimed the lower bunk, being older and heavier. Yveni didn't mind.

"Now one thing, Your Grace." Gerd used his title for the first time since Yveni had met him. "See those things on the wall?" He pointed to two bulky objects that looked a little like horse collars. "Those are life preservers. If the ship's in trouble, you put one on as soon as you can. It'll save your life if you end up in the water. Not for long, since the water's cold this time of year, but long enough maybe to let you be picked up."

Gerd demonstrated how to put the preserver on correctly, and gave him a few other tips on what to do if the ship sank. Yveni hadn't even contemplated the possibility before. "As if I don't have enough on my mind," he muttered as he undid the straps.

Gerd lifted the preserver over his head, laid it on the bunk, then contemplated him. "To get through this, make it work, you'll need to be tough. To rule, you need to be tough. Think you're up to it, Your Grace?"

Yveni stuck out his chin. "I'm here, aren't I?"

"Not by choice. The chances are, this'll fail. You know that. Gil knew that. But if you set out with the attitude it will, then it's bound to. I agreed to help him because I owe him more than I can ever repay, but I'm telling you straight, Yveni, you don't strike me as someone who'll make this work."

"Why? I've kept up with you all the way."

"But you've resented every bit of it. Your heart's still back home. I saw you looking at the pictures of His Highness. You let your sorrows drag you down. You don't have that luxury."

"My father's not a month in his grave."

"Will he be any more dead for your moping?"

Yveni's lips thinned and he hissed in anger. "Don't you speak of him in that way!"

His emotion left Gerd unmoved. "I'm speaking of *you*, Vicont. That sorrow you carry is a burden. Your longing for what's gone is a burden too. Leave it behind now and look forward. You've a long way to go and you can't afford to drag that along with you."

"What would you know of grief, you poacher?"

Gerd bared his teeth, and for the first time Yveni felt just a little afraid of the man. "Lost my parents and two brothers to the kirten fever when I was ten, Your *Grace*. Taken in hand by my uncle and beaten every day until I was thirteen and made a run for it. What do *you* know of that, boy? Anyone ever belt you? Were you turned out of your home by a landlord greedy for rent? No. You're nearly grown. Sure, it's hard now, but until now you've lived the good life. You could afford to weep and carry on for your father. I never had that. Don't talk to me about grief."

He turned to pick up the preserver and hang it back on the wall. "I know it's hard but sorrowing's a luxury. Saps your strength when you need to be hard and strong. Even with Gil's cousins helping you in Horches, you can't sit down and cry like a child. Uemire's poor, and life's tough there. Only the strong survive. Be strong or be dead."

"Why do you owe Gil?"

Gerd sat on the bunk, his eyes distant. "Like I said, I ran from my uncle when I was thirteen. Still scrawny and I knew nothing. The only way I could survive was to hunt—to poach on the ducal lands. Even then, I barely caught enough to survive. Anyway, being so useless, I caught my leg in a metal trap, laid to catch dunels ravaging the deer and kardip herds. Two days and nights I lay caught there, unable to get free. Nearly bled to death. Gil found me. Now, he could have done two things—handed me over to the castle authorities and the doctors, told them to heal me and imprison me as a thief, or he could do what he did, which was to take me to his own home, Sofia with Migel still a babe at her breast, and care for me. Cleaned the wounds, treated the infection, washed me, dressed me, fed me and hid me until I healed. Could have lost his job over it. He didn't even hesitate. And when I was healed, he found me a job as an apprentice to a toolmaker, and made sure I went to school as well. Kept his eye on me, did Gil. I disliked the toolmaking and when I was of age, I made my own way in life, but thanks to him I didn't end up in prison, I didn't lose my foot, I learned a trade and had an education. I could be dead or worse."

"So when he called you a poacher..."

Gerd smiled. "Just his little joke. Poaching's no way to make a living."

Yveni scratched his head. "But you've been a smuggler, you said."

"Aye. I never said I was an upright man. But I never stole from the duchy lands again, or put myself in Gil's way. He's done me one or two favours over the years—legal—and I've done some for him. I still owe him everything."

"You never cried for your family."

“Never said that, boy. I just said I didn’t have the luxury then. Sometimes the tears have to wait.”

“I’m...sorry for what I said before.”

Gerd shrugged. “A grudge is a luxury too. Hate—now there’s a powerful motivation.”

“Good, because I hate Konsatin.”

“Then let that be the thing that drives you, if you can’t find something else.”

“What happened to your uncle, Gerd?”

The man showed his teeth in what no one would call a smile. “Oh, it was very sad. Ended up with a knife between his ribs. No one ever found out who did it. Died all alone and unloved. What a fate, eh?”

Yveni repressed a shiver. Even though a threat had been made against his life, it wasn’t the same as knowing someone in the same room had actually killed a man. “Have you killed many people?”

“Only those that needed it, Your Grace. You’re safe. I’d never touch a hair on the head of anyone under Gil’s protection. Now. Enough of that. Get your gear stowed and we can eat lunch on the deck. The mess won’t be working until they set sail.”

“What will I do if I get seasick?”

“Puke, Your Grace.” This time Gerd really grinned.

Chapter Two

The thaw began a month later. Paole loaded the coffin on the small cart and hitched up Peni. The big horse was reluctant to leave her nice warm barn to step out onto muddy cold roads, but Paole needed her help and it was, after all, her job. She snorted a bit as he asked her to move out, but soon they were on their slow way along the track. Mathias's cabin sat a long way from town, by choice. Paole had no problem with that, but the six kilometres to Dadel would be hard work until the ground dried out.

Sheriff Rolf in Dadel knew Paole well enough, though he didn't like him. Nothing personal, Paole knew. Karvi didn't like Uemiriens any better than Uemiriens liked Karvi.

"You have business with me, Paole?" Rolf said as Paole stepped into his offices.

"Yes, sir. Mathias died in the winter. Brought his body for you to check."

"Free with your master's name, aren't you, boy?"

Paole held up the manumission. "I'm a freedman. Have been for six months. Where would you like me to bring the coffin, sir?"

Rolf's eyes narrowed, but Paole hadn't left him any room for complaint, and a freedman—even a Uemirien—had many more rights than a slave. "Over behind the magistrate court. I'll meet you there with the coroner."

Paole had to remember not to bow his head and act subserviently with these people, but to walk straight and proud. Too many former slaves never lost the habit so people treated them as if they'd never been freed. He didn't want to end up like that. He didn't know what being free was really like, but truly free men didn't duck their heads and mumble in conversation, unless they were ashamed. He had nothing to be ashamed of, even if the tone of Sheriff Rolf's voice indicated he spoke to some lesser species.

The coroner and magistrate took very little time to examine Mathias's body, but much more time examining the will and manumission, and questioning Paole about the circumstances of his death. Patiently and politely he went over and over the same ground, explaining how Mathias had taken a chill just as they'd arrive at the cabin for their winter shutdown, and this had developed into a chest infection. The old man had recovered, but had never truly been well after that, and had slowly declined over the next two months, until he'd finally died at the great age of seventy-six.

The coroner sucked in his teeth. "No sign of foul play, an elderly man, no obvious motive for hastening his death—"

"What about the will?" Rolf interjected.

The coroner raised his eyebrows in surprise. “Seems to me that Master Paole could have taken advantage of that years ago, in any way. Easy enough to tip someone like Master Mathias into a river, or feed him bad food. Unless you have some information you want to share, Sheriff?” Rolf shook his head, though his expression remained sour as he glared at Paole. “Then it’s natural causes, and my sympathies to Master Paole on his bereavement.”

Paole thought that was an odd way of putting it, since Mathias had hardly been family. The coroner scribbled a note on his file. “Are you to bury him up at his place?”

“Yes, sir. Just want the priest to say the right words.”

“Only decent. Will you keep up his practice?”

“I...think so, sir. It’s all I know.”

“Fine. Our work is done here, Sheriff. I’ll sign the death certificate, and you can collect it on the way out of town, Master Paole.”

The sheriff helped Paole load Mathias’s body back on the cart, but not out of a wish to assist. He wanted another chance to voice his suspicions over the death. “Are you telling me, boy, you didn’t help him on his way? You wouldn’t be the first slave to do that, not with an elderly master.”

Paole turned and looked him in the eye. “I’m not a slave. The laws on slander apply to freedmen, don’t they? Accusing someone of murder without proof, that’s slander, right?”

Rolf sneered. “Don’t pull those fancy airs with me, boy. You’re still a slave boy to me, papers or not. Keep out of my town. Your kind cause trouble.”

“Good day, Sheriff.”

Mathias had been his protection against the worst of this. What point in abusing a slave under a master’s control, after all? A freedman, a Uemirian who was his own master, didn’t fit in Rolf’s narrow view of the world. He wouldn’t be the last person who’d refuse to accept Paole’s new status. Paole found himself wishing that Mathias *had* told him about the manumission when he’d signed the papers. Given him a chance to grow used to the idea while Mathias was still there to help.

Paole drove the cart to the edge of the town, near the cemetery and shrine. The priest there climbed up on the cart and murmured pious words over Mathias’s body, smeared oil and ash over his forehead, and accepted a coin from Paole to pray for his spirit. “And for you, my son? A blessing as you start your new life?” he asked after Paole helped him step down.

Paole didn’t believe in the Karvin gods—or any god—but this priest offered kindness, and Paole knew well enough how little there was in the world. So he knelt, accepted the blessing and suffered the painting of a holy symbol on his brow.

“Fortune smile on you.” The priest bowed, leaving Paole with the body of his dead master.

Paole wiped the oily mess off his face and climbed into the driving seat of the cart. He didn’t believe in fortune either.

Mathias had given him everything he could to make a life on his own—a house, the drug stores, the wagon, the training. A tidy sum of gold too, more money than Paole had ever seen in his life. But he couldn't give Paole the respect of strangers. That, he'd have to earn for himself.

Chapter Three

Yveni, fortunately, wasn't prone to seasickness, and neither was Gerd, but the first few days on board were accompanied by the sounds of vomiting, and the smell of illness tainted the clean salt air. Yveni spent as much time on deck as he could, away from the puking passengers. He enjoyed it up there, never having seen the sea before. If he hadn't been a vicont or—the gods forbid—couldn't return to Sardelsa, he could imagine working on one of these great ships. He was strong enough. Being a sailor wouldn't be so bad.

He found it much less dull than the hostel. Here he could talk relatively freely to Gerd, and though the man's tales made his hair stand on end sometimes, they always entertained.

"Aren't you worried that when I become duc, I might have you arrested?" he asked one night after Gerd related a particularly daring scheme which involved escaping the duchy under the noses of the ducal soldiers.

"No. Gil wouldn't trust you if you were that kind of person."

Probably true. He couldn't do that to Gil, if nothing else.

The belt, it turned out, was waterproof, and though apparently much the same as what Yveni already wore, this had secret linings where money and papers could be hidden safely. The silver and moonstone pendant Gil had given Yveni to prove his identity to Gil's cousins and the letter of introduction were stowed, along with enough coin to help Yveni should he lose all his other possessions.

"Wear it to bed, and sleep in your clothes," Gerd told him that first night. "And leave your pack behind, it'll drag you down. The ship runs a battery—that's what their windmill is for—and if there's trouble at night, you'll see small lights guiding your way out. Now you need this too." From his pack, he produced a small metal whistle on a chain, which he put around Yveni's neck. "If you end up in the water, blow this until you've no breath left at all. It's the only way you'll be found in the dark."

"I wish you'd stop talking about all this."

"Better now than trying to shout it to you in a sinking ship, my lad."

"Been shipwrecked before?"

"Four times. I figure the water spirits don't want me, but you'd make a tasty morsel."

Yveni wrinkled his nose in disgust and Gerd had laughed. But it was far from funny, and Yveni had some nasty nightmares those first few nights, for which he glared at Gerd in the morning.

Many of the sailors were Uemirien, and when they found Yveni spoke their tongue, were glad to chat as they worked. It gave Yveni a chance to polish his accent and learn more about his new home. He still

worried that Gil's cousins would turn him away. Gil had left Uemire thirty years ago, after all. But Gil had assured him familial ties were powerful among his people, and his cousins would do as he asked for the sake of them. Yveni hoped he was right.

Two weeks into the journey, most of the puking passengers had gained their sea legs, as Gerd put it. Yveni felt quite at home on the ship, and almost wished the journey to never end. Gerd, however, was impatient. Once Yveni had been safely handed over, he planned to travel to Karvis where he had "business". Yveni didn't ask what. The less he knew, the less he'd have to take notice of in the future.

But one morning as Yveni walked the deck after breakfast, he noticed the mood among the sailors had changed—and so had the direction of the ship. "Why aren't we going north any more?" he asked one of the men.

"Storm coming. We need to go to port."

"Storm?" He stared up at the cloudless, bright skies. "How do you know?"

"First mate. He's a seer. He's Seen it coming. Cap'n knows better than to ignore him."

"Does he know if we'll sink?"

"We will if we don't move."

"When?"

"Tonight, maybe tomorrow morning. Busy here, boy. Shoo."

Yveni hurried to find Gerd and tell him, but Gerd had already heard.

"What do we do?" Panic, an unfamiliar and unpleasant emotion, rose in Yveni's chest. "The ship will sink!"

"Not if the captain judges it right. We're about two hundred kilometres from the coast, and there's a natural safe harbour. He can make that if he hurries. Be calm."

"Where's the storm coming from? The sky's clear."

"It's the sea, lad. She's full of surprises."

They stayed in their cabin, helpless to influence their fate, praying that the captain's skill would be up to the challenge. Grimly the crew worked to turn the boat towards land as cloud began to build in the south and the wind rose. The purser came around to warn passengers about rough weather, tell them how to put on their life preservers and ask them to stay in their cabins. He didn't actually mention the possibility of a shipwreck, but it was in Yveni's mind and it had to be in everyone else's.

As night fell, the waves grew mountainous, crashing over the bows. The ship shuddered with every massive blow. Yveni, terrified and desperately in need of reassurance, clung to Gerd, uncaring if the man thought him childish. Gerd did his best to distract him, but even the most incredible stories of skulduggery couldn't keep Yveni's mind completely off the ship and the storm.

A teeth-jarring crash sent them flying across the cabin, which tilted crazily away from the door. Yveni picked himself up and leaned against the floor, now at such an angle it had become a wall, for support. “What happened?”

“Feels like we hit rocks. Damn it. We need to get out of here. Ready?”

Yveni swallowed. “As I can be.”

Before they could struggle to the door, the klaxon sounded “Abandon ship.” They found the far end of the passageway already filling with water and panicking passengers. Gerd grabbed two women and told them to put their life preservers on and leave their bags behind. Yveni yelled the same instructions to a man with two sons. Desperate for anyone to guide them, the passengers turned to Gerd and Yveni to lead them up onto the storm-ravaged deck.

Sailors grabbed the passengers as they emerged from the hatch and helped them cling to the ropes strung along the deck for support, but it was almost impossible to keep a footing on the tilting surface, with the wind doing its best to rip them away from handfasts, and the waves crashing mercilessly over the sides.

Wildly swinging battery lamps shone a dim light on the lifeboats launching into the water, although the wave spray and wind-whipped rain reduced visibility down to just a few feet. A sailor who could make fire did his best to add to the feeble illumination, but the gales tossed his fireballs away. The passengers and crew would have to climb down into the boats, though they smashed against the ship with every wave. Women and children were loaded first, three crewmen in the boat below to help, Yveni and Gerd behind, doing their best to help the mothers with their youngsters. Yveni gripped the ladder with one hand, and held tight to the belt of the woman below him. His arm and neck muscles complained bitterly at the weight, but desperation gave him strength.

But then the woman he held suddenly screamed, and Yveni, straining to see beyond her and through the rain and the spray, realised why—her child had fallen into the heaving ocean, his head bobbing into view briefly before being swallowed up by the waves. Still screaming piteously, she reached out, clearly intended to follow the boy.

“No! You’ll fall!” Yveni tightened his grasp, but she let go of the ladder, and he suddenly had her full weight. He struggled to keep his one-handed grip on the ladder, his arm nearly torn out of the socket. For long seconds they dangled there, before the ocean intervened, throwing a huge wall of water over the lifeboat and against the ship, knocking Yveni clean off the ladder. He and the woman fell into the churning seas together.

Though the impact and the numbing cold thumped the breath out of him, still he tried to keep hold of her belt. He gasped as his head cleared the water, then yelled as he felt her break away from him. “Wait!”

But the wind tore his voice away and the waves buffeted him, disorienting him and blocking his view of the woman. He panicked as he realised he could no longer see the ship, or the lifeboat, or hear any of the sailors.

What had Gerd said? The whistle! His frozen hands fumbled under the preserver and inside his jacket and shirt to find the little chain, but even with the life preserver, it was a struggle to keep his face out of the water long enough to blow. But blow he did, though he shook so hard from the cold that his breath was scanty, and to his ears, the shrill sound barely rose above the howling wind and the crunching of timber on rocks. *Gods, someone help me. Father, help your son, I beg you.*

The icy water sapped his strength, though it could have only been a minute or so since he fell. His body was going numb, and refused to obey his attempts to swim. The waves drove him back and forth without his being able to resist. Every breath he took was shallower than the last.

A hand grabbed his collar. "Got you!"

"Gerd..."

Yveni tried to help, but could do little but let Gerd's strong arms and legs pull them back to safety. It felt like hours before he saw the weedy light of the boat lamps. Then other arms and hands seized him, dragging him painfully over the edge of the lifeboat. It rocked and tipped, and he fell across two people as the boat whacked hard against the side of the ship.

"Gerd!"

He turned and to his relief, saw sailors pulling Gerd over the side. His friend fell into the boat in a limp heap, but he opened his eyes and gave Yveni a crooked grin. "Not getting away...from me...that easy, boy." He was out of breath, but then they both were.

Yveni hugged him with strengthless arms and they fell together down among the other passengers. The sailors shouted that they were going, and began to row hard against the wild surf. The passengers clung together and prayed they'd survive this night.

The sailors only rowed clear of the sinking ship. Efforts turned to keeping the boat bailed clear of water while the storm swept over them. After an hour of misery, of gales and rain and waves throwing them about like corks in a child's bathtub, the winds dropped, and the motion eased. The rain too, became showers, then nothing. Amazingly, the moons and the stars appeared above them, the clouds gone as if they'd never been.

"Where are we?" Yveni asked one of the sailors slumped shivering in his seat. Hiljn, that was his name. He had the Vision, just as Gil had. Not much use in the dark, though.

"Safe. As soon as we can see the shore, we'll head for it."

"Did you hear that, Ge...father?"

Gerd replied in a kind of bubbling gurgle, and Yveni realised with a sickening lurch in his gut that the man had been injured at some point. "Gerd! Father! What's wrong with him?"

Hiljn clambered forward across the passengers, holding the lamp aloft as he examined Gerd's sickly white face, heard his breath coming in painful shallow gasps. "He took a hit between the boat and the ship. Crushed him. Probably stove in his ribs."

“Please, help him!”

“Naught to be done. Support his head, and pray.”

“But—”

The exhausted sailor fixed him with a hard glance. “No time for this, boy. There’s more here than your father. Don’t cause a fuss. Comfort him—that’s all you can do. I’m sorry.”

Gerd. Stricken, Yveni nodded, and Hiljn moved back to his position. The other passengers huddled close, staring at Yveni and the injured man, saying nothing. What could they say, when death sat among them?

Gerd’s rattling breathing went on and on, until Yveni fell asleep, exhausted by the cold and the exertion. He woke because the boat had begun to jerk. He gripped Gerd’s hand automatically, then opened his eyes. In the predawn glow, the outline of a land mass lay only a kilometre or so ahead of them. The sailors rowed while the other passengers slept, slumped against each other where they sat.

He turned to Gerd—and found his eyes open, fixed and unseeing. The rattling breathing had stopped, his skin cold not only from the damp or the night air. Gently, Yveni drew his hand down Gerd’s face, and closed his eyes. *Gerd, be at peace.* He bit his lip, but didn’t dare cry. This wasn’t the time for it.

He looked up and found one of the sailors staring at him, even as he strained at the oars. Yveni shook his head, and the sailor bowed his slightly in acknowledgment.

Yveni kept hold of Gerd’s hand all the way to shore. He had some notion of not wanting his friend to be alone on this last journey, though it was as much comfort for himself as anything. He couldn’t see the woman he’d tried to save, or her son. Had she been picked up by another of the boats, or lost? How many had died that night?

As the lifeboat beached, dawn was breaking. Hope filled the weary faces of the passengers as they saw the sun, and realised they were safe and on dry land. They stumbled out of the boat, falling onto their knees in thankfulness for their salvation. Only Yveni remained, until the sailors came. “Let’s get the two of you out now, boy,” Hiljn said, not unkindly.

They handled Gerd’s body with dignity, carrying him far above the high-tide mark. “We’ll need to bury him soon,” the other sailor, Pati, said. “When we’ve got things sorted out.”

Yveni could only agree. He removed Gerd’s belt and pouch, items of use to him and the rest of the survivors. He took off his boots, for shoes were too valuable to bury. The clothes would have to come off, maybe, too, but he couldn’t bear to do that. The most he could stand was to wrestle off Gerd’s jacket and cover his face with it.

No one was capable of moving, and Hiljn and Pati, like the passengers, flopped on the beach, trying to regain strength in weary, frozen limbs. As the sun came up, it became easier to move. The children recovered first, walking around and asking for food and water, though there was none to be had. Yveni felt

too numb and sad to respond to the plaintive questions, and the youngsters, seeing his lack of interest, wandered off to torment the adults.

He sat, letting the sun ease cramps and sore muscles, but unable to do more than that. They were on a wide beach of golden sand and small reddish pebbles, and behind it, trees and low, bent bushes, some covered with odd fruits and flowers. The abundant birdlife meant water somewhere, the trees meant shelter. Beyond the fringing vegetation, perhaps there were people. But how would they leave this place with the ship lying wrecked on the distant reef?

Once the sun gave them the full force of its warmth, Hiljn roused himself and stood, peering out towards the wreck and the treacherous rocks.

“Wreckage heading this way. We’ll need all that comes in.” He turned to Yveni. “Boy, you and those two men there, take the older children and keep watch, haul it ashore. While you’re doing that, I want you to collect shellfish off those rocks. We’ll use ’em for bait. We’ve got fishing lines in the boat.”

Having something constructive to do helped take Yveni’s mind off his grief. The children threw themselves happily into the task, though one boy asked hopefully about his missing father a couple of times. Yveni couldn’t offer him any comfort. He didn’t want to lie either. One of the men steered the child away, murmuring something about not bothering the “poor boy”. Of course—they thought him newly bereaved of a parent. Almost true.

Hiljn sent the other men and some of the women off to look for edible fruits, firewood and signs of fresh water. Over the next few hours, the incoming tide brought treasures—barrels that once held rain water on deck, rope, timber, crates of fruit, waterlogged sacks of grain, even a trunk of personal possessions. And bodies, among them, the woman and child Yveni had tried to save. Somehow she’d found her son in the foam, but they’d still been lost. Did she have a husband? Was he lost too? Yveni didn’t know. By noon, five more corpses joined Gerd’s, high on the beach. That accounted for thirty of the sixty-seven souls.

The children scrambled over the large formation of dark red rocks on the southern end of the beach, picking off the shells and using the tongues of their belt buckles to prise the creatures out. These, though few and tiny, made excellent bait, and the men casting lines caught ten fish in an hour. Not much to spread between twenty-four, but the fish, the fruit gathered and the food floating in, and the tart juice of succulents, eased the burn of thirst and the ache of hunger for now. At least they wouldn’t lack for fire. Pati had that gift, and there were matches in the lifeboat’s small survival kit.

The heat of the day relented hardly at all by afternoon, and the air grew unpleasantly humid. Hiljn decided the dead needed to be buried before they became foul smelling, but as three men and Yveni, using makeshift shovels made from driftwood, began work on a deep pit that would take all six bodies, Hiljn lifted his head and squinted along the shore. “There are more of our people.”

“Where?” Yveni peered. “I can’t see anything.”

"You haven't the Vision, boy. They're there. First mate, I see him. Can't spot the captain." He looked down at Yveni, his expression kind. "Maybe it wouldn't be such sad work for you to run and find them. Do you really want to dig your father's grave, Gaelin?"

Yveni looked down at the shifted damp sand, and his stomach turned over. "If you won't think less of me..."

Hiljn clapped him on the shoulder. "You run, find out if they're better set, or we are. We'll leave covering things over until you return. We'll say the words then."

"Thank you." He didn't dare tell Hiljn that he minded digging Gerd's grave less than that of the little boy. A ruler should not ask others to do what he could not, his father had always said, but Yveni'd had a gutful of graves and funerals.

Hiljn told him to go straight along the beach and he'd see the others soon enough. Yveni walked for a good kilometre or so before he spotted the group. First mate Sorke stood out with his height and his ever-present red bandanna. He greeted Yveni calmly as he walked up. "Saw you'd come," he said, tapping his temple. "How many of you?"

"Twenty-four. Six dead. My...my father being one." He felt horrible for lying but not to mention it at all would be odd.

"Oh, lad. I'm sorry. We've twenty-six souls alive. Two dead. We buried them."

Sorke's companions were all grown men. Yveni saw no sign of flotsam, and he explained that they were harvesting from the wreck. "Then we'll come to you," Sorke said. "I'll have two men row the boat down the shore to your position. In two days, help will come. I've Seen it."

"Help? You mean another boat?"

"No, but help all the same."

The arrival of the second group meant happy reunions for two families, sorrow for others, yet nine people were still missing—three crew members, and an entire family. Sorke's talent gave him no clue if they were alive or dead. He couldn't see them appearing in the next four days, and though that likely meant they were lost, Hiljn said it wasn't impossible they could turn up.

Under the stubby trees, crude shelters of branches and leaves had been put together while Yveni had been gone, and the newcomers set to making them stronger and more watertight. But the sun was close to setting and the dead had still to be decently buried. As senior crewman present, it fell to Sorke to say words of farewell and blessing to the six, lead a prayer to the gods, and ask the relatives to fill the grave. The man who'd lost a brother shovelled in grim silence, but the husband, bereft of wife and son, wept openly, heartbreakingly. Yveni's chest was too tight even to cry, but by the time he covered Gerd's body with sand, he could no longer see what he was doing for tears.

Others completed the task, then went to finish making the camp. Left alone, Yveni knelt by the grave mound for a little while, praying to the gods and talking to Gerd's spirit, thanking him. He hoped one day

that he would be able to tell Gil that the little poacher he'd saved from prison had died saving others, and as bravely as any man could hope to. But that was far in the future, if at all. Yveni only knew now he missed Gerd's solid company and his practical advice. He hadn't been an upright man, but he'd been a good one for all that.

At last the long, wearying day was over, and the survivors had shelter, food, and enough water in various forms to keep them alive for a few days. No one talked about the future, or even the recent past. No one had energy to do more than eat and huddle up next to their neighbours against the surprisingly cool night air. Yveni felt so tired, he could have fallen asleep standing against a tree.

Sorke set a watch and told them to keep the fires burning high all night to help those who were coming find them.

"And then?" Yveni asked. "How will we get to Horches?"

"We don't. We're close to Karvis, maybe only fifty kilometres from the border. When help comes, some of us can walk to the nearest town and ask for a boat to be sent. We only have to make sure those who stay can survive so long."

Yveni's heart sank. He could *not* go to Karvis. Not only would information have been sent there from Sardelsa about his disappearance, but Konsatin and his brother had strong ties to the country and Sardelsa's chief minister, Lord Timur, strongly suspected Konsatin was quietly recruiting there for his own plans. Walking into a Karvin port was as good as going up to the duchy's castle and handing himself over to Konsatin for slaughter.

For now he had to stay with this group because he couldn't survive on his own. Somehow he had to avoid going on any ship bound for Karvis. A problem for later.

He offered to take a turn at keeping the fire going that night, but Hiljn told him to get some rest. "Had a tough day and night of it, lad," he said kindly. "You can take your turn tomorrow."

Pride argued Yveni shouldn't allow himself to be coddled, but practicality told him he'd do better to follow Hiljn's advice. The men not on watch slept on the sand around the cluster of bodies under the shelters, pressed tight together for warmth. He'd never slept like this, even while hunting, but the chill air removed any qualms he might have held. The fires threw out a decent amount of heat, and pinned tight between two older men, Yveni was almost comfortable. Too tired to care about the "almost" part, he closed his eyes and knew no more until the next morning.

Chapter Four

The youth stared at him the entire time Paole tended to his sister. The young woman was suffering from mastitis, and her brother acted as chaperone in the absence of her husband and parents. Not an unusual situation, but the boy's frank admiration was new. Actually, not new, since Paole had attracted such looks before, but new in that for the first time in his life, he could stare back if he wanted.

But he found it hard to break a habit of such long standing, and besides, his patient needed his attention. "Plenty of fluids, especially tea with these herbs," he told her. "Massage and heat before you feed the baby. If the pain grows worse, use cold compresses."

"Will it get better?"

Her voice trembled. Her first child, and her parents gone to market, she needed reassurance as much as anything. He fixed her firmly with his gaze. "Yes, it will. Your child's healthy, and so are you. There's no infection. I can see it." He touched his temple.

She relaxed at once. "Thank you. My mother would say I'm being silly—"

"Not at all. I'll be in the area another two days. Your brother knows my camp if you need more help."

She thanked him again, and he accepted the modest fee. The family were comfortable, successful farmers, so could pay in coin. Many of his patients paid in kind, which suited him just as well. And those who couldn't pay at all except in gratitude, offered him something he treasured more than gold—their trust and their respect.

He left the house near sunset. He'd seen a good number of patients today in this village. Tomorrow he would set out his stall and dispense. That had been Mathias's pattern, and Paole saw no reason to alter it. First day, call in at the herbalists and dispensaries, and make his availability known. Next day, call on the sick—word went round pretty quickly, especially as he'd treat the poor for free. Then set up his stall for a day or two, and make more calls if needed, never staying in one village more than a week, because it upset the local healers. Mathias'd had a good relationship on his route with his fellow practitioners, and Paole would do nothing to disturb that. He had his own practice to build now. It could take many years before he was accepted as Mathias had been. Paole was patient. He would wait as long as it took.

He stretched his back, and thought about what he could make for his supper. He jumped a little as someone spoke from behind him.

"My sister wanted you to have this, Master Paole."

Paole turned. The doe-eyed youth, Lorn, held out two loaves of seed bread.

“That’s very kind, but not necessary. You paid my fee.”

“I know. It’s a gift. Maybe...I could carry it to your camp.” Lorn lowered long lashes over those soft brown eyes.

“How old are you, Lorn?”

“Eighteen. My sister isn’t alone. There are servants.” The boy had it all planned out.

“Then if you want to come to my camp, you’re welcome.”

Lorn was overeager and clumsy, but he was a beauty to behold, with perfect brown skin and long, clean limbs. To Paole, who hadn’t been touched this way in more than ten years, the boy made a feast almost too rich to dream of. His kisses made Paole headier than a mug of strong beer, the feel of his fingers delicious and strange. Lorn, for all his youth, took the lead and Paole gladly let him, for what did he know of this act except a few fumbled gropes in the dark, and brief furtive rutting where the masters couldn’t see them.

Lorn tugged at Paole’s belt and opened his trousers. Paole’s cock poked rudely out, exposing it to Lorn’s liquid and still admiring gaze.

“Do you...are you...?”

“Shhh,” Lorn whispered, and bent his head.

Paole woke in the predawn to gentle kisses, and went to wrap his arms more closely around his companion. But the boy pulled away, though with one last kiss to Paole’s cheek.

“No, I have to go. My parents return today.” Lorn yanked his boots on.

Paole sat up and pulled his shirt closed. “Thank you...for the bread.”

Lorn turned and smiled. “Maybe I’ll bring you some more next time you come through the village.” He leaned over and kissed Paole on the lips. “Until then, Master Paole.”

Paole felt cold and a little empty when the boy had gone, like a wisp of mist burnt off by the rising sun. The sex had been fine. The companionship had been what he craved. One sweet night left that craving unsatisfied, sharper than before.

Now he understood why Mathias had bought him as a slave. Until the last two years of his life, the old man could manage his practice perfectly well on his own, though Paole made it easier, no doubt. But Mathias had been lonely. It was no life for a wife, and a servant could leave for another employer any time they wanted. A slave, though, had to stay. Guaranteed company, for a price.

The only problem, it was a one-sided arrangement, though Mathias had been as kind and generous a master as any slave could hope for. But no slave really wanted a master at all, and good-hearted as he was, Mathias had never once asked Paole what he truly desired from life. Now he had the freedom he’d always longed for, but it hadn’t given him the satisfaction he’d thought it would.

For a few brief moments, with his arms around the beautiful boy, Paole thought he'd found that, but it had been an illusion. If he could find it for real, then maybe his freedom would bring him the happiness he'd always hoped for.

Chapter Five

Two days later, just as Sorke had Seen, help arrived, attracted by the pillar of smoke from the fires the survivors had kept burning day and night, and by the wreck slowly breaking apart out on the rocks. Tribal Uemiriens, fisherfolk and scavengers, tall, thin people with the tow-coloured hair so common among their race, come to see what pickings they could glean. Finding so many survivors surprised them, but left them untroubled. They hunkered down readily and shared their food, telling Sorke where fresh water could be had a little way inland, and how to fashion water bottles to carry it.

Though the sailors had done pretty well in keeping the survivors alive and in good shape, the arrival of the tribesman lifted everyone's spirits. It meant a way off the beach and back to civilisation. To the crew, it also meant confirmation that their fellow sailors were lost, for the tribesmen had found and buried the bodies of the nine missing people on the shore north of them. Time now to move on.

The tribesmen refused to lead anyone directly to Karvis, but they could take a few men to the nearest settlement some twenty kilometres farther south along the coast, and from there, transport could be arranged to the border and to a telegraph station. With luck, the survivors could be picked up within a week.

But Yveni had no intention of going with them, and once four men—two sailors, two passengers—had left with some of the tribesmen, he went in search of Kafoe, one of the older fishermen. Yveni had become friendly with many of their clan, who'd been intrigued by a youth who spoke their tongue like one of their own, and by his knowledge of their land from Gil's stories.

He found the old man sitting cross-legged on a boulder, plaiting grass to make a water bottle.

"Young Gaelin, just when I need a helper. Hold this."

Yveni held the plait in place while Kafoe made an intricate adjustment to his weaving. "Kafoe, I need your help too."

Kafoe cocked his head. "Tell on, boy."

"I need to go to Horches. Karvis is no friend to me. I can't go there."

"Horches is too far to walk, boy. Too far to swim."

"But people do walk there, and travel there. If I could find such, I could travel with them. I'm in no hurry, but I can't go south. The Karvi aren't good people."

Kafoe spat and nodded. "Too true. They steal our people and take them as slaves when they can. Our tribe, we have a seer to protect us, and we're too slippery besides. The Karvin king says, 'oh, the parents

sell the children willingly,' but it's a lie. None of us would sell a child, and especially not to *them*." He spat again.

"They take children from the tribes?" One of the reasons the Uemiriens were so disliked in Sardelsa was the belief that they would sell their children for gold. Gil and Sofia had always said it was a lie, but Yveni hadn't known how it had come about.

"Yes. Raiders come. Mainly inland. Twenty or so every year. Only children, so they can tell their lies. The children know the truth, but who believes a Uemirian child over one of *your* people?"

Yveni flushed. "There are no slaves in Tuelwetin."

"No, but you take the Karvin money and the Karvin trade." He nodded at the goods and boxes on the beach, rescued from the sea. "Some of this was made with slave hands."

He had no argument against this, because it was true. It had been a delicate point of diplomacy between the Unity of duchies in Tuelwetin and the Karvin king for a long time, but no one wanted to upset the balance of trade over an issue which, when it came down to it, didn't affect Tueler citizens at all. Yveni's father had muttered about it often, and done what he could, but one duchy out of twenty, however rich, could not turn opinion quickly.

"But now you understand why I don't want to go there."

"You're in no danger, boy."

"Still...is there a way to Horches?"

Kafoe's face creased up as he thought. "North of here, fifty miles or so, is a village called Lild. Fisherfolk, like us, only they farm too. Every two years they take a kardip herd across country to the Grekil market. This is their year."

"There's a road between Grekil and Horches. People travelling. I could get a lift, buy a ride, maybe."

"Got to get there first, boy. The herders walk all the way, and it's eighteen hundred kilometres."

"I don't mind. My father's dead—where else will I go?"

Kafoe nodded in acknowledgement.

"When do the herders leave?"

"End of spring, when the kardip calves can walk. A month or so. But they might not let you go with them."

"If I don't ask, I won't know. Kafoe—will you take me? Or can someone else?"

"Long way, boy, for a favour. What can you offer?"

Yveni cast about. His pack had washed ashore. The sight of the cheap books Gerd bought him had made his eyes fill, but they'd be no use to these men, and the clothes wouldn't appeal. "My father's boots. They're good, tough leather. They'll last a long time. His knife too."

Kafoe pursed his lips. "Maybe."

"And this?" Yveni lifted the chain off from around his neck and held out the whistle hanging from it.

“What is it?”

He demonstrated and Kafoe fell back in shock at the sharp, astonishing noise. He stared at Yveni for a few moments, then laughed, holding his sides in merriment. “Oh yes. For that thing? Someone will take you, even without the boots.”

Two days later, without any fuss, and no farewells except to Sorke and Hiljn, Yveni slipped out of the camp in the company of Hilario, Kafoe’s young, bright-eyed grandson. Their journey to Lild would take four or five days, Hilario judged. He was in a chatty, cheerful mood, glad of the excursion and delighted with the compensation for his trouble. His light voice rang out along the shore in the clear dawn air, along with a blast from his new whistle every few minutes. It didn’t look like he would tire of the sound anytime soon.

Yveni, walking beside him and determined to keep up despite his shorter legs, let him ramble on. Though he was glad to make a start on his journey, the rhythm of his footsteps didn’t distract him from his gloomy thoughts the way the constant work had done back at the camp.

“You’re very quiet, Gaelin. Maybe I’ll call you ‘silent child’ from now on.”

Yveni stopped watching his feet and looked up at his companion. “Uh...sorry. I have a lot on my mind with my father dying.”

“I didn’t know.” Hilario stopped and, putting his hands together, made a little bow. “Sorry. I meant no disrespect.”

“I know. I’ve never really been alone before, that’s all.”

“But you’re not alone. You have me.”

“True.” How could he explain to this son of the sea and sand what he meant? How his life in the castle meant being surrounded by people, and how Gerd had eased the ache of fleeing from all he’d known. “Ignore me.”

Hilario cocked his head. “I can’t do that. It’d be rude.”

“Then tell me a story. I don’t want to talk just now.”

“That I understand. Very well. Let me tell you of Fifin, the great sea fish, and the day he ate a village.”

“A fish eating a village?”

“It’s true. An enormous fish from the depths of the sea. Fifin came looking for food. Monstrously hungry he was. He ate the crabs, but he was still hungry. He ate all the little fishes, but he was still hungry. He ate all the *big* fishes, and he was still hungry. Finally, he said to himself, there’s not enough food in all the oceans for me. I’ll seek my meals on land. So he threw himself up onto the beach, and ate all the trees and all the bushes, and even the rock lizards. But he was *still* hungry.” Hilario glanced at Yveni. “Truly.”

“Uh-huh.” Yveni suppressed a grin. “And then what?”

“No good, he said. But then he saw some funny-looking round things, and they were covered with branches, so he thought, let me fill my belly with those. So he munched them all down, and all that was in them. At last he was full. He slid back into the ocean, content, and ready to sleep it off. But a sound kept annoying him. A loud, sad sound, coming from the beach. So he popped his head up, and there on the beach was a little boy, crying. ‘Child, you’re keeping me awake. Why are you crying?’ ‘Because you ate my mother and my father and my family and my clan and all our houses,’ the boy said. ‘I just wanted the branches because they looked so tasty.’ The little boy began to cry again. Well, Fifin was a hungry fish, but he wasn’t a *bad* fish, so he swam up onto the beach, and burped. Up came the trees and the bushes and the lizards. He burped again. Now the houses, and the branches on the roofs and inside the houses the little boy’s family was safe and so were all his clan. The boy was happy and his mother and father were happy. But Fifin was not. ‘Now I’m hungry again,’ he complained. The boy said, ‘Give him the branches!’ So the clan pulled all the branches off their roofs and fed them to Fifin, and he was happy. And now every year, our village throws the old branches from our roofs into the sea for Fifin to eat, and now we know he won’t come on the land again because he’s got plenty of food. And I swear by the god of the sky and earth every word of that is true.”

Yveni stared at Hilario’s innocent expression. “Every word?”

Hilario put his hand over his heart and bowed. “Of course.”

“This word ‘true’—it has another meaning in Uemi?”

“Of course.”

Hilario laughed. Yveni couldn’t resist his cheeky grin. “You’re crazy.”

“Everyone says that. Come on, we have far to go before nightfall.”

They did and by the time Hilario called a halt about an hour from sunset, Yveni could barely move. He’d never walked so far in his life, and his poor feet had blistered badly, though his shoes were stout and comfortable.

Hilario, barefoot as he’d probably been all his life, stared at the blisters in dismay. “You should take off those things, throw them away. Bad for you.”

“And then my feet would be bloodied, not blistered. We don’t have time for me to become used to walking barefoot.”

“True. You’ll have to wash them. Go soak them in the sea. You can cast a line while I make the fire.”

The cool water helped, but if Hilario had asked for more help than fishing, Yveni wouldn’t have been capable of obliging. He did manage to catch a couple of small fish for their supper, to supplement the sweet fruit Hilario collected as he foraged for firewood.

After supper, Hilario smeared the juice of a beach succulent over the blisters, and rubbed cold ash into the soles of Yveni’s feet. “To toughen them up. Don’t put those evil things back on tonight.”

Yveni wondered about biting insects or worse, but thought he needed to worry most about the blisters. He really needed to stop moving around. He'd never been so tired.

Hilario built up the fire, then laid a blanket on the ground close to it. "We'll share."

Yveni tried not to reveal how awkward he felt at the idea. He'd been sleeping hard up against a dozen male strangers for nearly a week without a second thought, but this was nothing like being out in the woods, hunting with Gil and his father's court. As vicont, it would have been unthinkable for him to share his bed or his tent with a soul other than his father or a manservant. It wasn't like snuggling with his younger sisters either, when one of them was lonely or sick. Hilario wasn't a child, as his swagger and revealing britches proved.

"Come on, Gaelin. I'll steal the blanket if you don't join me."

Yveni grinned to hide his unease and lay down on the ground. Hilario joined him, pulled the second blanket over them, then wrapped his arms and body tight around Yveni's. Yveni stiffened—was this normal?

"Cold." Hilario shuddered. "Your clothes are stingy. They give no heat."

"Uh, sorry. Do you...um...sleep like this in your camp?"

"Sure. With my wife. You have a wife?"

"No. I'm too young to marry." Not strictly true, since he'd turned seventeen the month before his father had his stroke. The issue of a betrothal had been put aside with all the worry over his father's health.

"Hah, you're plenty old enough. I've been married for three years and I have a son, another on the way."

"But you're only nineteen."

"So?"

Yveni tried not to think of the Uemiriens as primitive for letting children marry, but it seemed very strange to him.

"Will you marry when you can? Everyone should be married. I like it a lot."

"Uh...yes, I suppose so. I mean, my father wanted me to marry. To carry on the family name. I mean, business."

"Funny reason to be married. I want to be married for sex and children."

Under the cover of night, Yveni flushed hot. Hilario poked him. "You don't want sex and children?"

"I've never thought about it," Yveni lied. What he should have said was he didn't want sex with a *wife*, a secret he'd only ever confessed to Serina and sworn her to never reveal to anyone.

"Hmmm, you're strange. Are all your people like that? Cold?"

"I don't know," he said somewhat stiffly. "I don't know all of them."

Hilario laughed and poked him again. “True, true. Well, I think you need a wife. They’re nice and warm at night,” he said with a suggestive thrust of his hips that made Yveni want to bolt. “Men aren’t so soft.”

“Uh...no.”

“But they’ll do for warmth if there’s no wife.”

Yveni really didn’t want to continue with this line of conversation. “Good night, Hilario. I’m tired.”

“Good night, silent child. I hope your blisters sleep well too.”

Chapter Six

The seasons rolled on in their inevitable course, but Paole kept so busy with his practice that it shocked him to realise it was but a month to the snows, and that he needed to make haste back to the cabin and resupply if he wanted to get through the winter. The transfer of Mathias's practice to him had been successful even beyond anything his former master could have wished for him. Not only had old clients and patients accepted him in Mathias's place without a blink—hardly surprising since they were well used to seeing him, and Mathias had passed on much of the patient treatment to Paole's hands over the past few years—but new ones had come also. Some poor, unable to pay, but others too, easily capable of doing so.

The reason escaped him until he asked one of the willing young men who'd come to his camp and his bed for a night's companionship, why so many more people wanted his help.

"Master Mathias didn't have your touch," the boy told him, his breath warm across Paole's chest, his fingers teasing the line between his navel and his pubic hair. "My mother says she believes you when you say she'll be well. He was nice, but sometimes he said what wasn't true, if he thought the patient wouldn't want to hear it."

"Healers have to lie sometimes," Paole protested, defending Mathias's reputation.

"Yes, but you lie more honestly." The boy had laughed and kissed him then, so there was no more talking. But it gave Paole something to think about.

Mathias hadn't had the Healing Sight, but he'd had a gentle way about him Paole admired. Perhaps he'd been too gentle for some. Paole didn't know. He'd missed the old man this past year. Mathias had trained him as well as he'd been capable of, but Paole knew he'd been a bad student in many ways, and now had to stuff a good deal of reading into the gaps in his knowledge. He couldn't always rely on the healers and herbalists on his route to help him either, since he competed with them to a certain extent. Twice he'd been tricked over a prescription, and only his vigilance had saved a patient from being given the wrong medicine entirely. So as he headed back to the cabin for the deep winter, the wagon was loaded with new books and notes for study during the silent season.

He arrived late at the cabin, and had only a week or two to lay in firewood and supplies, and ready the place for the snow. He'd left orders in Dadel for his stores—and something else.

When he called in at the smithy to collect it, he had the bad fortune to encounter Sheriff Rolf talking to the blacksmith, Jurgen. The sheriff turned and snarled. "Thought I told you to stay out of my village, boy."

“Produce the magistrate’s order for that, Sheriff, and I’ll comply.”

“Learned to talk back to your betters while you’ve been away, have you?”

Jurgen slowly edged away, not wanting any part of this argument. Paole didn’t blame him. “No, just to you. Excuse me, I have business here.”

“Then you’ll have to wait your turn.”

Jurgen put his hand up. “Master Paole, the stone’s out back if you’d like to collect it.”

Paole looked past Rolf as if he didn’t exist. “Thank you, sir.”

Rolf yanked him around by his arm. Paole stood up to his full height, making sure the man appreciated the thirty-centimetre difference between them, and the twenty kilograms or more he had on the sheriff—all muscle too. Uemiriens didn’t run to fat the way Karvi tended to. “Excuse me, Sheriff, but I’m busy.”

Rolf didn’t flinch. “What stone are you talking about?”

“A stone for Master Mathias’s grave.”

“Think that gets you off the hook?”

Paole very deliberately detached Rolf’s hand from his arm. “I’m not on a hook. But you’re wasting my time when I don’t have it to spare. Good day.”

He walked behind the smithy and found the dark, neatly dressed stone where Jurgen said it would be. He crouched to read it. Strange to see Mathias’s full name and the date of death. It didn’t seem like anything to do with the man he’d known for so long.

“Are you happy with it, Master Paole?”

He stood and smiled at Jurgen. “Yes, sir. Very fine work. What do I owe you?”

“Nothing. Master Mathias saved my boy’s life when he was five years old. Now he’s a man with children of his own. Call it my gift to his memory.”

Paole bowed. “Thank you, sir.”

Jurgen waited until he’d loaded the stone into the cart. “We were all surprised when he came back with a Uemirien slave. We didn’t think he believed in that kind of thing. We thought...” He coughed. “Maybe he found the nights a bit lonely.”

“Master Mathias never laid a hand on me like that.” Paole’s cheeks heated up, his hands forming into fists against his will. “He was a good man.”

Jurgen backed off, hands raised submissively. “I meant no disrespect.”

“I understand. But you know what rumours are like.”

The man’s eyes darted to the shadows inside his workshop. “I do know. And I’ll tell you now, there’s only a few fools around here who think...what a certain person thinks.”

“I don’t care what fools think. I do care what people say about him.” He put his hand on the marker stone. “I want him remembered.”

“So long as there’s those of us with reason to be grateful for what he did, he will be. He must have thought highly of you, Master Paole. That’s good enough for me.”

Paole bowed again and said his goodbyes. As he collected his food and supplies, he pondered Sheriff Rolf’s continued bile and rumour mongering. It wouldn’t do more than cause a bit of ill will, but it chafed Paole that Mathias’s generosity could be used against him this way. Another reminder, if he needed one, that Karvis could never truly be his home, yet he had no other to go to.

Chapter Seven

The journey to the village of Lild took them five days. By the end of it, Yveni was considerably fitter, and the constant rub of Hilario's gentle teasing had knocked away his embarrassment over a number of things. Just as well, he supposed. High-bred delicacy was inappropriate for "Gaelin" even if they were expected of His Grace, the Vicont Yveni. His feet had grown tougher, and so had his hide. Hilario wouldn't give up if he discovered Yveni holding back over an issue, poking until he won an honest answer. Several times, Yveni had been tempted to punch the man for his damn insolence, but every time Hilario's broad grin disarmed his anger and made Yveni realise that he lived in a different world now, with different rules. Here, Hilario was king and Yveni his humble student.

They arrived late morning in the village, a collection of tall barns and low cottages, surrounded by fields of vegetables and kardip paddocks that ran right up to the edge of the beach, where fishing boats lay moored. The residents of Lild came out from houses and stables to greet Hilario in friendly fashion, though he'd never met any of them before. His tribe was kin to some of them, and that was all that mattered.

The villagers regarded Yveni with a little more suspicion, until Hilario put his arm around him and said, "Gaelin is my spirit brother."

Smiles broke out and Yveni was invited into the home of Jako, Hilario's second cousin twice-removed—at least, Yveni thought that was the relationship. Half the village piled into Jako's large white painted house to watch their headman hold court and interrogate the newcomers.

Jako was a big man with a sour face, married to a heavyset woman who sat next to him in their main room and stared at Hilario and Yveni as if committing them to memory for a report. Jako, puffing on a foul-smelling pipe, listened to Hilario's request, and Yveni's tale, before explaining that he was the main kardip breeder in the village, and the one who'd lead the cross-country drive. Every two years the clan divided the herd, taking half to the stock market in Grekil. It was a great annual meeting of the tribes, where spouses were found and goods traded. He thought Yveni could easily obtain a ride with a trading caravan to Horches, but he doubted a soft Tueler boy could walk so great a distance.

"No one rides on the way out, boy. We need the carts for trade goods and weak calves."

"I can walk. And I'll work hard for you too. Any job you want."

Jako laughed. "Careful, boy. You don't know what you're promising." He sucked in his weathered cheeks and pointed his pipe at Yveni. "This I can offer. We go in a month. You work hard, prove yourself,

you can come. Otherwise..." He flicked his pipe in the direction of the sea. "You can go where you want. You'll be no concern to us."

"That's fair."

Hilario put his arm around Yveni's shoulders and hugged him. "If you fail, you come back to us, eh, silent child? Always room for another."

"No room for loafers anywhere." Jako gave Hilario a significant look. "When did you say you were leaving?"

Hilario laughed. "Cousin, you're not very friendly."

"We'll feed you and bed you and give you food and water to go on with, cousin. But it's a busy time here, so stay and work, or run home to your tribe."

"Home for me. I miss my wife, and I'm sure she misses me." He rubbed his crotch suggestively.

"Huh. If you were a male kardip, I think I'd geld you to keep you in check. Today, tomorrow, you're welcome. After that, like fish in the sun, you'll begin to smell."

Hilario grinned and agreed. Yveni grinned too. They reminded him of Gerd. And Gil. No one else in his life would dare be so blunt. He liked knowing exactly where he stood with people.

Hilario was allowed to wander the village making friends, but Yveni wasn't given that luxury. Jako took him by the arm and hauled him over to the tall barns behind his house. Jako's farmyard was the biggest in the village, from what Yveni had seen, and he guessed that many of the fields behind it belonged to him, as did the large herd of kardips squealing plaintively on the other side of a long wood rail fence.

"What do you know about kardips, Gaelin?"

Yveni ran through all the facts and figures he'd learned from his tutor about the economic importance of these animals, and decided none of them were appropriate to this situation. "Nothing, sir."

Jako grunted. "Thought as much. Know how to shovel shit, boy?"

"Yes, sir."

Jako whistled, and a young woman, forehead smeared with dirt, and wearing a long leather apron over the loose trousers and shirt that both sexes wore, came out from the barn. "Raina, this is our new stable boy. Boy, you do as she says or you're out. Anyone catches you slacking, you're out. Understand?"

"Yes, sir."

Jako grunted and walked off, leaving Yveni to stare at Raina. She wrinkled her nose at him, clearly unimpressed. "Ever cleaned a stable before?"

"Yes, miss." All those years of his childhood happily working with Gil whenever he could escape from his books would stand him in good stead, he hoped.

"Shovel, fork, broom, over there. Pile the shit in that cart. Well, get on with it!"

She turned and stalked back into the barn. She hadn't even asked his name or what he was doing in the village. Huh.

Yveni quickly learned that looking after a handful of cosseted thoroughbred horses as a way of passing the time while he talked to his friend wasn't any real preparation for dealing with the output from fifty sturdy kardips and their newborn calves. Someone had to have been doing it before—someone now off doing something more pleasant, he suspected. He only had to deal with a day's worth, but he discovered that an adult kardip could produce several kilos of shit in a single massive bowel movement. He also learned that kardips had a fondness for these bowel movements just as he'd cleaned the stall thoroughly, and particularly enjoyed doing their best to drop their turds on *him* as he worked.

Raina ignored him, but not out of rudeness—or not completely. As he worked, Yveni observed her tending to several sickly calves, as well as helping a number of female kardips straining in labour. Even with so many animals to tend to, and having to rush between them all, she handled each straining mother, each querulous youngster, with gentle, reassuring hands.

She gave him a fierce scowl as she caught him staring. “You’re supposed to be working.”

“Catching my breath. You’re very good with them. You remind me of a friend.”

“Oh? Where’s this friend? Why aren’t you with him?”

Realising his mistake, Yveni had to lie. “Oh, long story,” he said airily. “I’m Gaelin.”

“Good for you. Get back to work, I don’t have time to chat.”

He bowed as gracefully as he would to a duces, and obeyed. He kept an eye on her when he could, fascinated by the contrast between her gruff demeanour and her care of the beasts. It made him homesick for Gil, Sofia and everyone else. Even the foetid stench of the manure reminded him of the stables in the castle and his beloved mare, Ande. What if that bastard Konsatin was riding her now? What if Konsatin had turned Gil and Sofia off? What if Yveni’s flight from danger had left his sisters and his friends in the middle of what he’d sought to escape?

“Oy, you. Bring me a bale of straw. Can you lift one or do I need a *man* to do that?”

Yveni wiped his eyes, pretending they were full of sweat. “I don’t know—would you say ‘please’ to a man?”

“Huh, not likely. I need the straw now. From the barn next door. If you’re waiting for your ‘please’ you can wait until the heavens fall.”

He thought about lecturing her about manners for all of half a second, and went off to fetch her straw. It wasn’t his place or his job to correct the yokels, especially when he was the one beholden.

He did his best to look utterly unconcerned by the weight of the bale. It was a lot harder to lift than he expected, but the feat left her unimpressed. She told him to spread the straw quickly on the floor of the stall. Her concentration was all for the female kardip labouring and wheezing with effort. Even to Yveni’s untrained eye, she looked in trouble.

“Will she die?”

“No. Shut up.” She went over to a bucket to wash her hands and arms thoroughly with soap. “More water. Pump out back. Hurry. Use that bucket.”

He rushed to obey, and when he returned, he found her up to her armpit in the kardip’s bottom, her face a mask of concentration. He couldn’t fathom what she was trying to do, but suddenly she grunted and pulled her arm out, the kardip squealed as she flopped down heavily on the ground, and from inside the beast slid a perfectly disgusting mess of blood and mucus, and a bag with a baby kardip inside. Raina put her hand over the calf, frowned, then scooped it up and ran.

He ran after her. “What are you doing?”

She’d only gone two stalls down where another baby kardip lay on straw. She set the weakly struggling newborn on the ground, picked up the other calf and rushed it back to the mother who’d just given birth. She set the calf right in the middle of the birth mess, then stepped back. The mother didn’t react at first, but the calf gave a pathetic little squeak that drew her attention. She turned, peered down at it and gave it a lick. The calf squeaked again, and struggled to its feet, while she kept licking it. When she was satisfied it was clean, she gave it access to her teats. As the calf began to suck, the mother gave a soft squeal as if happy with a job well done.

Raina left the stall, Yveni following her. She picked up the newborn calf, cleared away the birth sac, and took a knife from a hook on the wall. “It won’t survive,” she said to Yveni’s horrified look. “Take it out back and cut its throat. Then take it over to the house.”

“But—”

“I have the Healing Sight. I know it won’t live. Do what I said!”

She handed the wet little creature and the knife over to him, then turned away to wash her hands in yet another bucket of water.

Numb, Yveni carried the calf outside. It clearly struggled to breathe, so Raina was probably right, but it was so small and helpless. He’d killed before, but always animals he’d caught hunting. Not creatures lying trustingly on his arm.

He swallowed. This was a farm, and kardips were food. He still said a quick prayer to the spirits as he killed the calf as quickly and cleanly as he knew. The spurting blood made him want to be sick. This wasn’t like hunting deer in his father’s forests. There was no sport in this.

He carried the corpse over to the house, around the back to the kitchen or where he thought it would be. Jako’s wife glared suspiciously at him. “Um, Raina had me kill this. Said it wouldn’t live, and to bring it to you.”

“Oh good, it’ll do for supper tomorrow. Give it here, boy. You can wash up under the pump there. Don’t come into my house in that state.”

She took the kardip's body and shut the door in his face. He had no choice but to go off and use the pump, glad to get the shit and the blood off himself, though there was little he could do for his shirt. Maybe he could ask for an overall or something.

"Ah, silent child, are they working you hard?"

Hilario held a bone in his hand, from which he tore strips of cooked meat with his strong white teeth. Yveni's stomach turned. "Yes. I just killed...um, Hilario, what's the Healing Sight?"

"Oh, that's a powerful gift. Not common. Anyone with that knows what's wrong with a sick person and if they're going to die. Some say it's a curse. Where did you hear of such a thing?"

"A woman here says she has it."

"Probably has. I wanted to find you. I'm leaving tomorrow. People here aren't so friendly, and I want to see my son. Will you be all right?"

"Of course." Hilario had taught him a good deal about this land and how to survive, and though it would be hard to say goodbye to him, he had his destiny to follow and Yveni had his.

"Maybe we'll meet again, if you sail in another ship and it sinks."

Yveni shuddered. "No thanks. There have to be easier ways to meet up with friends."

Hilario laughed. "True. Well, we'll see each other for a little longer. You have to go back to work?"

"I think so."

"Then I have to play and eat, to keep the balance. See you later, silent child."

Cheeky beggar. Yveni would miss him. All he did lately was say goodbye to people.

He returned to the barn, trying to remember where he'd left his shovel. He found Raina slumped tiredly on a straw bale in one of the stalls.

"I, uh, did what you asked."

She glared up at him, but then to his surprise, her expression softened. "I hate killing them. The little ones. The adults? Easy. But the babies..." She bit her lip.

"You knew it would die? You were sure?"

"It had malformed lungs. It would only have lived an hour or so, and struggled the whole time. Better to ease its pain and give one of my orphans to the mother."

"Your gift works with people too?"

"Of course." Her eyebrows drew together in puzzlement. "You know our tongue, but you don't know about the gifts. Who are you?"

"I'm from Sardelsa, in Tuelwetin. I was travelling with my father to Horches when our ship was wrecked. He...died. I'm trying to finish the journey, to meet his relatives. I mean, our relatives."

She didn't notice the slip. "I wish I could go to Horches and study to be a healer. But Father wants me to go to Grekil and take a husband. I don't *want* a husband. I don't like men at all, great stupid oafs that they are."

“Can’t you talk to your father? Don’t you need healers in the village?”

“Not as much as we need children. I can’t do both. Best I’ll get to do is birth these smelly damn things. I like kardips but they’re not very bright.”

“Do you like horses?”

“Never seen one. What are they like?”

“They’re bigger than a kardip, with short hair. Smart and beautiful animals. We ride them in Tuelwetin. They have them in Karvis too. They came from the old home.”

“Old home?”

“The place where the people on this world came from. A thousand years ago or more, they say. They don’t teach you this at school?”

“No. Only reading and writing, the ways of plants and animals, the doings of the gods and the workings of the seasons. It’s all you need in a place like this. I want to leave, see more of Uemire. I’d love to see Tuelwetin. I don’t fit here at all.” She suddenly glared. “And you’re only idling here to avoid work.”

“I’m not! I’m being polite.”

“Well, get on with your chores. My mother will bring lunch for us in a little while, but you won’t earn a bite unless you finish the sweeping out. Understand?”

“Yes, miss.”

She made a face and he grinned as he took off. At least he’d managed to winkle some conversation out of her.

Something to ponder though, that she could be so unhappy at being forced to marry and live where she’d grown up, and yet Yveni had accepted that such would be his fate from the time he was old enough to understand the idea. Even now, he only made the journey to Horches to further the goal of returning to his home and fulfilling the plans his father had laid out for him. Would Raina be so unhappy about her father’s plans if she was forced to leave this village and abandon all who loved her?

Maybe she’d like it. Yveni couldn’t tell. *He* didn’t like it at all because Konsatin could easily be wrecking all that Yveni’s father had put in place. Besides, he missed everyone.

He leaned on his shovel and stared at the pile of manure in front of him. Already a high price had been paid to save his life. Gerd had died, and who could say that Yveni’s life was worth more than his? And what of Serina, betrothed to a man she knew capable of murder? Or Gil, the only protection his sisters had? Even the ministers loyal to his family—how did they fare without the heir to the ducal throne there to rally behind?

He clenched his fists. He should have stayed and stood up to Konsatin, exposed his lies and his plots, and had him arrested. Would it really have been as impossible as Gil said? As Lord Timur had warned? Konsatin was just a man, after all, and not even part of the ducal family. His rise to prominence had been based on very little.

Perhaps he should abandon this plan and return to Sardelsa, take his chances. But if he failed, then Serina would have nothing to hold up against her marriage to Konsatin, and nothing would stop him seizing the throne as her consort.

“Boy, you’re daydreaming.”

He turned. “Sorry. I was thinking of my family.”

Raina didn’t snap at him as he half-expected her to. “Wash up, then come and eat. I can’t leave the youngsters, so it’ll have to be in here.”

The food turned out to be pasties, rich and flavoursome, even better than the ones Sofia used to make. To Yveni, after days of fish and raw beach fruits, it tasted better than the finest court food. He licked his fingers appreciatively. “Your mother’s a wonderful cook.”

“Yes, she is. So am I but I hate doing it for all these men.”

Yveni grinned. “Why do you hate us so much?”

“I said *men*, not little boys.”

“I’m seventeen. Nearly eighteen!”

“Really? You don’t look it. You’re small for your age.”

He hadn’t thought himself particularly short, but Uemiriens were all so tall, he looked like a child beside them. “How old are you then?”

“Eighteen. And a half. Are you really seventeen?” He nodded, trying not to look as offended as he felt. “You’re not so bad, I guess, even if you do have a prick.”

Yveni flushed. He’d never heard a woman use that word. Raina didn’t notice his embarrassment. “Men only want two things from a woman—sex and cooking. And babies, I suppose. They don’t care if we’re smart and prefer it if we’re not, and all they want is for us to shut up and do what we’re told. Like children.”

“Women aren’t very quiet where I come from. They even rule. We’ve had some fine duces in Sardelsa.”

“Duces?”

“A female duc. That’s what we call the ruler of the duchy.”

“Can’t imagine that being allowed here. Not that we have a ruler, but any time someone’s laying down the law, you can bet it’s a *man*.” She spat the word like the worst curse in her language. “And now I’m supposed to go to Grekil, be all quiet and sweet and let someone bid for me. Hah. Why bother? They’ll find out the truth when they marry me.”

“Will that mean you have to leave the village?”

“Wish it did.” She poked gloomily at the ground with a bit of straw. “No, Father will ask too much for a removal. That’s when someone wants to take a wife away from their home. He’s rich enough that he can buy wives for my brothers to come here, but no one will be able to afford to take me away.”

Yveni frowned. "We don't pay for people to be married in Sardelsa. Everyone gives the couple gifts and money to help them make a new life, but the parents don't get anything."

"It's the other way around here. Sardelsa sounds like a wonderful place. Why are you leaving?"

Damn. He kept forgetting how much he had to hide. "Um, well, my father wanted to build a trading business with his cousins in Horches."

"And you don't have family in Sardelsa?"

"My mother died when I was seven. My father's best friends, who are Uemirien, helped raise me while he was working. That's where I learned your language."

"So you're all alone in the world now? You're like one of my orphan calves, then."

"A bit."

"And you're still going to Horches? Do you want to work as a trader? What would you do if you didn't?"

For someone who couldn't even bother to be polite to him a couple of hours ago, she had a lot of questions. "I thought about being a sailor until I was shipwrecked. Not so thrilled by that idea now."

She nodded emphatically. "The sea's a dangerous place. Every couple of years, we lose one of our people to her. But she gives us food and many other things we use, so you could say it's a fair price. I'm just glad my family aren't fisherfolk. So you're going to be a trader all your life?"

"I hope I can make my fortune and go home one day. I haven't thought that far ahead."

"Suppose not, with your father dying and all that. You finished?"

He nodded, so she gathered up the cloths the pasties had been wrapped in and stuffed them into the little basket her mother had brought over. "Things will be quieter now for me. All the females have birthed, so it's just the weaklings and orphans to care for. Still as much shit for you to clean up," she added with a malicious little smirk.

"I don't mind. Your family's doing me a favour, and I want to earn it."

"You're strange, Gaelin."

"I suppose I am. Better get back to work now."

The afternoon was as hard as the morning, only longer, but he really didn't mind. It helped when Raina found him a pair of gloves so he didn't tear up his hands shifting hay bales around.

By the time one of the children at the house brought out mugs of tea and tasty little cakes for the two of them at the barn, Yveni thought he'd done as much as he could for one day, and thankfully, Raina agreed. "You'll sleep in the barn, same as me."

Yveni was horrified. "You're not allowed to sleep in the house?"

She shoved at his shoulder. "Don't be daft. It's because the youngsters need to be fed twice in the night. Little and often or they die." Her face grew sad. "They're so fragile just now. Of course, they grow up into those great smelly beasts."

“You don’t mind them being killed when they grow up?”

“No, because they’ve had a good life by then. That’s all anyone wants, isn’t it? A good life before a quick death?”

“I suppose so. I want more from life than a kardip does.”

“We all do. You being a man, you might even get it.”

She reminded him of Serina, though Serina didn’t hate all men, just her betrothed. And as it happened, she had every reason to. Gods, he missed her. He couldn’t even mention her or Olana to anyone. It made it so hard to bear being away from them.

“No need to be all sulky about it,” she said, misreading his expression. “Want another cake?”

“Yes, please.”

She had a much better treat for him when they finished—feeding the baby calves. She lent him a leather apron. He worked out in five seconds why he needed it because the babies were very messy eaters. Together they sat and fed the greedy things, while she explained how some of them had been twins and the mother could only ever feed one, or the mother had rejected them for one reason or another. The mother of the smallest had died in birthing it.

“She was an old beast. Shouldn’t really have been bred but the male had other ideas,” she said darkly. “It’s always the female that pays for the male putting his prick where it’s not welcome. You’ve gone all red, Gaelin.”

Yveni cursed his cheeks for their betrayal. “Have I? Sorry.”

She snorted. “Don’t they—?”

A booming male voice interrupted her. “Raina? Why isn’t the boy mucking out?”

Jako stood with his hands on his hips at the front of the stall, glaring at them both.

Raina stared coolly back, not at all intimidated. “Because I asked him to help me with this. I’ve more orphans than I can handle and he has a deft touch with them. You didn’t say I wasn’t to let him help. You said he was a stable boy.”

Jako grunted. “Mind how you talk to me, young lady. All right. So long as he doesn’t slack off.”

Yveni stood. “Sir, I have one request. My clothes aren’t suitable for this. Do you have any old ones I could wear while working?”

“Oh, so fancy, are we?”

Raina stood, as if prepared to defend Yveni physically. “Father, it’s a reasonable thing to ask.”

He gave his daughter a sour look. “Ask your mother, if you’re so concerned about it. I don’t handle such matters. Boy, you sleep in here.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And you eat here too. You’re not family, whatever that silly creature from the tribe down south says. ‘Spirit brother’, my arse.”

“Yes, sir.”

Jako pursed his lips in irritation and stomped off.

“He doesn’t like me,” Yveni whispered.

She sat down and calmly resumed feeding the calf. “He doesn’t like anyone. I’m amazed he’s letting you stay. I suppose it’s so we can leave one of the men behind. We don’t have enough marriageable people to only manage with them for the drive, but it leaves the village short. So long as you’re not completely useless, he’s bound to take you with us. It’s not like you have to be that bright to herd kardips.”

“I think you have to be bright to do it well. Or look after them. My friend, Gil...ane, the Uemirien? He runs a stable, and he says not everyone can work with horses. He says I could, but he knows plenty that can’t.”

“Yes, but horses are smart, you said. Kardips aren’t. That’s why we raise them. You’re cute as anything, aren’t you?” she said to the little calf sucking madly on the bottle she held and spraying milk everywhere. “But in that pretty little head, you have a very tiny brain.” She gave the baby a pet as she said it. Clearly she didn’t mind stupidity in anything that wasn’t human and male.

“I think if you know animals, it doesn’t matter how smart they are. I bet you’d be good with horses.”

“I’d love to see one.” Her eyes went soft. “So many things I want to see. Tell me more about Sardelsa.”

She was *starving*, Yveni realised. Hungry for a world she had never seen, places she might never go. She shamed him because she was far more curious than he’d ever been. He’d been content to simply read about the other duchies in the Unity, the whole country of Tuelwetin, the other countries in the world. In his ignorance—arrogance, he corrected himself—he’d thought it enough. But he’d known nothing, really. Raina wouldn’t have been content as he had been. With his opportunities and privileges, she’d have demanded to see as much as she could. Yveni’s whole life before now had been the castle and the countryside around it. Before this journey, he’d never gone more than a hundred kilometres from the place where he’d been born.

So as they finished feeding the baby kardips, he fed her hunger for knowledge from his own store of education and then for fun, he told her about the stories in the stupid books Gerd had bought. She giggled over the incredible plots, and when Yveni tried to describe the covers, she laughed so hard she fell off her hay bale.

“If I had tits that size, I’d have to walk stooped over.”

“Or carry them around in a wheelbarrow.”

She whooped again. “Oh don’t. My sides hurt already.” From outside came the ring of clanging metal. “Supper bell. I’ll have to eat with them, but I’ll come back after. Wash up and go to the back door. Mother will give you a basket. Um...don’t tell anyone you’re seventeen, all right? Especially not that you’re nearly eighteen. Say you’re fifteen—you’re small enough.”

Yveni pushed his wounded male honour back out of sight. "Why?"

"Because Father might get a bit funny about me spending any time talking to a *man*." She rolled her eyes. "As if I'd be tempted by you."

"Hey, that's not very nice."

"But it's honest." She grinned. "Aren't you used to me yet, Gaelin? You need to toughen up."

"I guess I do. You better run along or your father'll be angry."

"Probably. I'll be back later. Mother will give you some spare clothes and bedding. Ask her after supper though."

She ran off. Yveni took his time finding the pump and washing again. His clothes were a disgrace. He supposed they'd let him wash them. Where did the water come from? They must have cisterns. Something else he knew little about and ought to investigate. One day, if the gods willed it, he'd be ruler of people who lived like this, and he should know how they did. He'd certainly never take his morning glass of kardip milk for granted again.

Chapter Eight

The snow season had once been Paole's favourite time of year. Snug and quiet with Mathias, with only a few chores to do, and the rest of the time spent by the fire, reading or listening to Mathias expound on possible cures for this and that, it had been the closest thing Paole could remember to being with his family.

But no more. As the spring arrived, he vowed he would never spend another winter like that again. The quiet had become a silence that nearly sent him mad. The lack of company, of another voice, had felt so oppressive at times that it drove him out into the snow to stare up at the starry skies and beg for someone, anyone, to come and be with him. Being on his route, alone in his wagon, had been no preparation at all for this. Then, he could always expect to see people within a day or two, even in the remotest area. A healer's wagon drew the needy like a field of flowers drew bees. Here in the cabin, night after night, he wondered how he would get through the next quiet day, never hearing another person. Knowing that if he died out here, he'd die alone. He didn't know how to be alone, and he didn't want to learn the art.

He needed an apprentice. Someone to keep him company, and someone to make sure the vast wealth of Mathias's knowledge, all his books and recipes and cures were not lost. The marker on Mathias's grave wasn't half the memorial all this information could be. Paole had coin. He could afford an apprentice, and in time he could offer them half the practice, go into partnership with them. The plan had been all that had kept him sane over the last month of his hibernation.

He set out on his route as soon as it was practical to do so, eager to put the isolation and memories of his winter sojourn behind him and to put his plan in action. But he quickly realised there was a problem—he didn't have any idea how to find an apprentice. He asked the herbalist in Siend. "Breed one" was the answer, which might be accurate but not much use.

A healer in Lume suggested he adopt a child from a poor family, and the merchant in Umdipon, who supplied medical equipment and pill presses, told him flat that no family would let one of their children go to a Uemirien, so he would have to take on an orphan or a foundling. "You could try the labour market in Kivnic. Maybe a tenant farmer turned off his land would apprentice a boy to you."

Paole thanked him for his advice, but thought none of these suggestions were the answer. He didn't have the resources or the knowledge to deal with a young child, but an older one would be most likely already engaged in the family business. He did ask some of his beautiful boys if they'd be interested, but

each of them had told him frankly that his life was too unsettled for them, and too uncomfortable. “One day I’ll have a wife and children of my own,” Lorn told him. “And a house too.”

Paole was stung. “So what’s all this with me?”

Lorn kissed him. “This is fun, and nice. But I have a fortune to make, and I need heirs to pass the business on to. Don’t be angry.” He nuzzled Paole’s chest and let his hand wander lower. “You’re like a cup of fine wine on a moonlit night. Delicious and strong, but a man can’t live on it.”

“You should be a poet, boy.”

“Can’t make money with poetry. But making love is free. My quiver is not yet empty, Master Paole.”

How could Paole refuse, when the memories of his beautiful boys’ kisses had kept him going during those lonely winter months? But he still needed an apprentice and was no closer to finding one. The labour market in Kivnic looked like his only option.

Chapter Nine

The month passed quickly, and surprisingly pleasantly. Most of Yveni's duties revolved around the barn and Raina's orphans, but Jako also had him out in the fields a few days, minding the one- and two-year-old kardips destined for market. He quite enjoyed that, except when it rained. But he knew he'd have to grow used to that to go on the drive with the villagers.

In the evenings he helped Raina with the evening feed. They talked about her dreams, about the books Yveni had read, the things he'd heard about Uemire, some of which turned out to be nonsense, and more about the gifts that Yveni had learned of from Gil and which were so common among her people. These were completely unknown among full-blooded Tuelers, though Gil had heard tell of children of mixed marriages who had signs of gifts. In Tuelwetin and Karvis, the gifts were frowned on, seen as witchery or more usually dismissed as fakery. In Uemire, they weren't remarkable at all. He quickly grew used to seeing one of the fishermen casually lighting his way at night with fire he'd made from nothing, or watching a herder convince a male kardip to come over to him or go into a pen, simply by "asking". Raina's aunt knew before anyone else in the village when the fishermen's boats were on their way back because she had the Vision, and could see people and animals a dozen kilometres away, sharp as letters on a page to Yveni.

The only gift the village lacked—a sore point with Jako, apparently—was a seer. It was the one gift valued above all else, but the last seer, an elderly man, had died the year before. Raina said her father planned to try and persuade one to marry into the village, though Jako would have to pay for the privilege. Yveni understood the desperation. He and all the other people on the ship would most likely be dead now without Sorke's ability.

Lacking a seer, they had to plan for the drive like other mortals. There was a lot to do. Twenty men and women from the village were going, a dozen of those seeking spouses. Yveni was the youngest, officially and in reality. He'd let Jako believe he was fifteen just as Raina had suggested, which probably protected him from the worst of Jako's temper. The man was a bit of a bully, though respected as the leader of his clan in the village. He was kinder to children than to adults, if only slightly.

That Yveni would be going on the drive was accepted very early on, thanks to Raina's support. As she'd said, it meant a more valuable worker would remain behind, and Yveni was disposable. If any harm came to him, better that than one of their own.

The journey would take three months, since they could only travel at walking pace. The great market in Grekil was held for a month at the high end of summer. If Jako succeeded in obtaining spouses for all the young people, it would be a much larger group returning. Yveni wouldn't see it because he hoped to be long gone by then.

They left on a cold, bright, late-spring morning, with a hundred complaining kardips behind them, of which Yveni, Raina, and two other youths she studiously ignored, were in charge. The animals were allowed to wander and graze at their own pace, the rest of the group walking ahead to prepare the camp for the evening and the meals along the route. One of the youths, Jein, had the gift of speaking to animals, so there was no risk of the kardips becoming permanently lost. Yveni and the others were there mainly to encourage them, protect them from attack and help the confused—for, as Raina was fond of saying, they really weren't very bright.

The work was dusty, boring, and as the sun grew stronger, hot. He was in better shape than when he'd set out on the walk to Lild with Hilario. He dressed Uemirien-style now, in loose trousers and overshirt, only keeping his boots and belt. Raina said he looked and sounded like any other Uemirien, since there were many of their people with hair and skin as dark as his.

"Is that a good thing?" he asked.

"Not to me." But she gave him a grin along with it, so he wasn't entirely sure if she was serious.

The drive held almost no excitement, for they travelled over plains as flat as a piece of paper and with no prospect of encountering any other people until they'd almost reached Grekil. The main pleasure was in talking to his companions, especially Raina, and the companionship at night. Jako may have thought Yveni an expendable foreigner, but the others did not. The conversation around the fire, ribald and loud as it often was, warmed Yveni more than the fire itself.

A watch had to be kept against dunels, who would take a young kardip if they were hungry enough. Fortunately, the duty was shared by all, and not just Yveni and the others. It meant no great hardship, only sitting up a little later than normal every other night. He shared a watch with Raina at her insistence and after she'd faced down her father's narrow-eyed suspicion. Yveni had gone out of his way to appear meek and much younger than he really was—except with Raina. He could be more himself with her.

Which was why it frustrated him that he had to lie to her. She'd been nothing but honest and kind to him, and he'd repaid her with dishonesty. After a month's travel and thinking over the issue all that time, he decided he had to come clean.

Once they settled around the fire and had their mugs of tea to keep them warm, he took his courage into his hands. "Raina, there's something I need to tell you. My name's not really Gaelin."

"Oh, I knew that."

He blinked at her matter-of-fact tone. "How?"

"You're always just a tiny bit too slow to answer to that name. But I figured you had your reasons for not telling us who you were."

"I do. It's not that I don't trust you and your family, but it's a big secret."

"Well, go on. Start with your real name."

"Yveni of Sardelsa. The Vicont Yveni."

"What's a vicont?"

"Um...it means I'm the son of a duc. I'm the heir to the throne of Sardelsa."

She stared blankly, but then hooted with laughter, making one of the drowsing kardips squeal mournfully in complaint. "Oh sure you are. And I'm queen of Karvis."

"It's true. My father wasn't the man who died in the shipwreck. He was the duc who died three weeks before we left the castle."

"You've been reading too many of those stupid books, Gaelin or Yveni or whatever your name is."

"It's Yveni, and I'm not making this up!" He shoved up his sleeve. "Look. That's my family's symbol. We receive this when we turn fourteen. Only the ducal family in Sardelsa bears this mark."

She shrugged. "It's just a squiggle and dots. Means nothing to me. How would I know who wears it or not? You don't have to lie to impress me, Yveni. I'm angry you think you do."

"I don't." He sighed. "I'm tired of lying to you. I've wanted to tell you the truth for ages, to tell you about my sisters, and Gil, my friend. But if you don't want to know, I won't bother you. Just don't tell anyone what I've said, please. It'll put them in danger and might get me killed."

She rolled her eyes and sipped her tea, staring out into the dark beyond the fire, clearly unimpressed and irritated. Yveni cursed himself. Of course it sounded incredible. The only proof he had...

"Wait, let me show you this." He undid his belt and found the opening for the secret pockets, and drew out Gil's letter and pendant. "My friend Gil is the huntmaster at the castle."

"You said Gilane."

"Yes—I lied to protect him. Pay attention." She pulled a face at his rudeness. "His cousins run a trading business in Horches. Family of Ferdi. This is a letter to them. Read it."

"Yveni..."

"Go on. That's not my writing, you know that. Read it."

She obeyed, though reluctantly. Yveni waited impatiently. If this didn't convince her, nothing would.

She lifted her head. "The pendant?"

He gave it to her and she fingered the pretty stone. "That was given to Gil and Sofia by Ferdi's father, Gil's uncle. It's a family heirloom. He'll know I'm who I say I am when I give it to them."

"This margrave person..."

"Konsatin, yes."

"Really was going to kill you?"

“So Serina thought, and Sofia saw it. He’s evil, Raina. He seemed so nice, wanted to be a friend to me and help me while Father was ill, and all the time he was plotting my death.”

“Why didn’t you tell people? Why didn’t you stand up to him? Running away wasn’t very brave.”

She’d hit upon his guilt with unerring aim. “Everyone said I didn’t have a choice. He had so many of the nobles fooled, and with Father having just died, Gil thought people would say I’d gone mad if I made such an accusation with such slight evidence. I’m not old enough to rule. By Sardelsan law, I’m a child until I’m eighteen, and too young to rule until I reach twenty-one. I didn’t want to risk my sisters or Gil’s family either.”

“But you left them there. Won’t your sisters be in danger?”

“Yes. But he can’t kill Serina if he wants the throne, he can’t force her to marry for two years, and Olana is no threat to him.”

She handed the letter and pendant back, her expression thoughtful. “So you just hide for three years and come home, and then he’ll lose?”

“I don’t think it’ll be that simple, but if I’m alive, I can claim the throne. Can’t do that if I’m dead.”

“You’re really this vincount?”

“Vicount. Yes.”

“So you’d never actually mucked out a stable before.”

“Actually, yes. Gil really does have stables. When my mother died, my father fell apart. Gil was his best friend, and Gil and Sofia raised us three children in a family environment until he could take over again. We more or less lived in Gil’s house for five years, and I spent most of my free time with him until recently. *Konsatin* didn’t approve, of course. He said that since I would be regent or ruler sooner than anyone had expected, I needed to be aware what people thought. I don’t care what people think. Gil’s a good, honest man.”

“You love him?”

“Like a father, and Sofia like a mother. I barely remember my own. So if Gil says I have to leave, then I won’t argue. He’d never hurt any of my family. I miss them all so much.” He stared into the leaping flames and saw the faces of those he’d left behind.

She rubbed his arm a little, the first time she’d touched him in affection. “You must have thought me silly to whine so much about my life.”

“No. You want more than this, and you’re smart enough to do what you would like to do. I wish I could help.”

She smiled a little. “Maybe if you become the duc, I can come and work in Sardelsa.”

“Of course. We have a very good infirmary at the castle. I’m sure you could train there.”

“Now all we have to do is get you back on the throne, and me away from my father. Should be easy.”

“If you can birth a kardip with twins in the breech position, I’m sure you can do anything, my lady.”

She blushed. "Is that how you speak? What do I call you?"

"Your Grace."

She giggled at the term.

"It's true. And when I become duc, I'll be 'Your Gracious Highness'."

"Now that's just too grand for you."

"It is a bit. I could ennoble you and then you'd be the Lady Raina. How do you do, my lady?" He made a little bow.

"Very well, your graceness."

He laughed. "I think we need to work on your courtly speech." But then he sobered. "You really can't tell anyone. Konsatin's hunting for me, and he has connections to Karvis. You could endanger yourself, your family."

"Don't worry. Even if I told them, they'd never believe me. It'll be our secret. Yveni...if you become duc, do you mean it? Could I really work at your infirmary?"

He placed his hand over his heart and made a little bow. "By the spirits of my beloved parents and the honour of the house of Elaini, I, the Vicont Yveni of Sardelsa, swear unto the Lady Raina, she can work in my infirmary if she presents herself to my court. Good enough for you?"

"Sounds good. But what's the use of an oath like that? Sardelsa's a thousand miles or more from here, and my father will never let me go."

"You never know."

"Yes, I do. You and I have our lives planned out by our parents, and we can only do what they order. The only difference with you is there's a bit of a holdup. Once you go home, you'll do just what your father wanted."

"I want it too."

"I want *more*. Much more. I wish I could go with you."

"Me too, but I don't even know if I can get myself to Horches. Or what I'll do when I arrive."

"Not fair," she grumbled. "I wish I'd been born a man."

"I'm glad you were born, man or woman. I'll always consider you my friend."

She looked up, a surprised smile on her lips. "That's possibly the nicest thing anyone's ever said to me. If more men were like you...maybe marriage wouldn't be so horrible."

"Um...actually, I have another secret."

"Gods, Yveni. How do you remember to keep them all?"

"This one I've kept for years. I, uh...don't want to get married at all. I don't like women. I mean, not like that."

She reached for the billycan of tea and topped up her mug. "Oh *that* I already knew."

"How?"

"I just did. You never look at my...you know, breasts. You're seventeen. You'd look at breasts."

Yveni's face was hotter than the fire. "I wouldn't. It's rude."

"It's what men do. But this I'd really never tell Father. He can't even cope with male kardips mounting each other. He takes them off to be gelded as soon as he sees it, even if we were going to breed them."

Yveni resisted the temptation to cross his legs. "I've never told anyone except my sister, Serina—not even Gil. My father expected me to be betrothed. We were going to arrange it as soon as my sister was settled."

"And how were you going to manage that, your graceness?"

"Um. I...thought it would just work out. I tried not to think about it," he added somewhat feebly.

"Nice surprise for your wife. Though if she was like me, she might be happy. Don't suppose you're allowed to marry a man."

"No. Men who love other men aren't forbidden or anything, but if one has a duty..."

"That's a terrible reason to marry someone."

"But you're going to."

"We'll see. Oooh, now I'm going to be curious for the rest of my *life* because I'll never know what happened to you!"

"I could write a letter."

"Father would tear it up."

"Send a messenger?"

"To our little village?"

"Why not?"

"Would you?"

"I'll certainly try."

"I can just imagine Father's face if you did." She suddenly punched him in the arm, which made him yelp. "You better not be spinning me a yarn, Yveni of the house of thingy."

"I'm not. And it's Elaini, not thingy. You're very rude."

"You're the one raised in a castle, not me. Poke the fire, will you? I'm cold."

"Anything you say, my lady." He dodged her fist as he jumped up. Female or not, she had a mighty punch.

She'd have probably quizzed him about it more in the morning, but the dawn broke wet and miserably cold. Jako ordered the camp to sit tight until the rain cleared, so they could only huddle in one of the sleeping tents and wait.

The clouds parted close to noon, and Jako sent Yveni and the others out to gather the herd. Most of them clustered tightly together, heads towards the centre of their group, hairy backsides out. But two were missing.

“Oh that idiot one with the spot on its face is gone again,” Raina said. “And I can’t see the one with the short tail. Jein, you better Call them.”

The youth screwed up his face in concentration. “They’re lost. They’ve wandered too far and don’t know where to go. That way.” He pointed south. “Not that far, beyond those trees. They can’t see us, so they don’t know we’re here.”

“Wonderful. Gaelin, we better go fetch the silly sods. Jein, you start moving them on. We’ll catch you up.”

Jein ran off. Raina shook her head disgustedly as she walked over to Yveni. “I swear kardips don’t have the brains the gods gave mouldy bread. And it *would* have to be now, while it’s all wet.”

“Sooner we go, sooner we’ll catch up.”

“Don’t teach me my job, your graceness.”

Walking through the mud was deeply unpleasant and slow. All the time, they kept calling to the two lost kardips, hoping the creatures might use what little intelligence they had and follow the sound. Unfortunately, these two were the stupidest of a very stupid breed, and Yveni and Raina were almost on top of them before they raised their woolly heads, jerked and then ran over to their humans, kicking up their heels with joy and knocking Yveni over into the mud. Raina, heartless woman, laughed until she was nearly sick at the sight of him.

“You could help me up,” he grouched.

“Here.”

She held out her hand, still giggling. He glared at her as he got up. “Just marvellous. Now I’ve got a wet bottom, and this mud won’t dry for ages. You damn things aren’t worth it,” he scolded, shaking his fist at the two young kardips, who gazed back at him with adoring brown eyes, devoid of the least intelligence. “Well, come on. We’ve found the brutes.”

Using a switch to lightly whack the curly backsides of the errant animals and keep them moving, Yveni and Raina trudged through the mud back to the road. He was still cross at her unfeeling reaction to his accident, and she was daydreaming again, maybe thinking of Yveni’s promise to have her work at the infirmary—or plotting a dirty trick to play on him, a major source of amusement for her clan on this journey. Yveni, who’d never liked practical jokes, found it rather tiresome, which of course meant they considered him a favoured target.

“Gaelin.”

He looked up from watching his feet in the slick mud. “What?” He matched his tone to her quiet voice.

“Look.”

He followed her pointing finger. To the east of them, about three hundred metres away, stood a hooded figure on a horse. “Uemirien?”

“I don’t think so. I think we should hurry. Come on. Forget about the beasts. Run!”

She grabbed his hand and tugged, and driven by the urgency in her voice, he let her pull him. Running in the mud was worse than trying to run on ice, but every time one of them slipped, the other pulled them up hard and kept going.

But they couldn’t outrun a horse, and the thud of hoofs soon filled Yveni’s ears. “Keep going!” he screamed at Raina. The kardips scattered in blind panic, squealing and kicking as they ran away. The rider wasn’t interested in the animals. He wanted Yveni, cutting him off from Raina and swinging a vicious looking whip to stop him escaping.

“Who are you?” Yveni yelled. “What do you want?”

The man had a black cloth over his mouth and head—only his dark eyes were visible in his mask, like a demon’s face. His black horse snorted and reared, as strange and hostile as its rider.

“What do you *want*?” Yveni repeated.

The man advanced, tossed the whip so the handle became a club, and swung it suddenly, hitting Yveni on the temple and driving him to his knees, dazed. He felt hands on his collar and belt, lifting him, and his feeble struggles could do nothing to stop the man.

But then he was dropped, and Raina shouted furiously at the man, spitting curses. Yveni crawled away from the horse, trying to clear his vision to see what was happening. He heard a sickening thud, and a sound as if someone had fallen to the ground. “Raina...”

Footsteps, and the hands on him again. He fought as best he could, but the man shook him like a dunel would a rabbit and threw him over the neck of his mount. Yveni’s hands were quickly tied behind him, the horse moved as the rider climbed into the saddle, and they galloped away, the motion sickening in his confused brain.

Who was this? One of Konsatin’s men? How could they possibly have found him so quickly, or at all? He struggled to think against the nausea of the blow and the jolting motion. He was close to fainting by the time the horse stopped moving, and quite unable to tell how far they’d gone or in which direction.

The man dragged him off the horse, and Yveni promptly collapsed onto the mud again. He thought he would puke, but since no one touched him for a minute or so, he got his breathing under control and his stomach to stop rebelling. His head hurt like fury though. He heard people shouting in his own language, but with a Karvin accent. *Slavers*, he realised with a flash of sickening insight.

Someone came over and dragged him upright. Another person with a hidden face. “I’m not a child,” he said in Tetu. “You have no right—”

The man smashed a fist across Yveni's face. "Shut up, boy. You're a child because I say you are. Get over there." He yanked Yveni around and shoved him towards a small group of Uemirien children all huddled around a fire, staring at him with huge, frightened eyes.

Another man quickly seized him and put a chain around his waist. This was connected to that on a young boy, then Yveni's knife was pulled from his belt and his hands freed. The man shoved him to the ground. "Be quiet and behave, or you'll be beaten, boy."

"I'm not—"

A vicious blow landed across his shoulders—a whip strike. "Shut up!" the man roared. "Are you deaf as well as stupid?"

Shocked by the pain, Yveni hunched over and didn't reply. He heard a grunt and footsteps walking away from him.

None of the children spoke, even when he was able to sit up again, his shoulders still burning from the whip. There were eight of them, all apparently under fourteen, all chained. Several clung to their companions, so he guessed they were either siblings or from the same clan.

"Hello," he whispered. "I'm..." Quickly he realised that he dared not reveal his real identity here, not to Karvi. "Gaelin. What's your name?" he asked the boy to whom he was chained.

The boy checked to see if any of the adults were about. "Tilin," he whispered. "I'm seven. I want my mother. I want my sister."

Yveni put his arms around the child and hugged him carefully. "I know. They're very bad men."

"Can you help us escape?" The girl looked to be one of the oldest children.

"I'll try. Where are we going?"

"I don't know. I don't speak what they speak."

"I do. Maybe I can find out. What's your name?"

"Jair," she told him. Hesitantly the others named themselves. All of them wanted to know if Yveni could help. He lied and said he hoped so, but in his heart, he didn't know how he could. He was one against at least four—no, five—men with horses and guns and whips, and even if he could free himself, he could never take these eight children with him. Not out here. Only if he could somehow kill all of the men, and he had no training in such things at all. He knew how to use swords, guns, and bow and arrow, but hand-to-hand combat wasn't considered a necessary ducal skill. He could imagine his father's horrified reaction if anyone suggested it should be.

He tried to calculate how far they had to be from Karvis, no easy thing with his headache. Lild lay about a hundred and sixty kilometres from the border. Jako had calculated how far they'd travelled only the night before—about four hundred and fifty kilometres. Yveni didn't know the exact direction of travel, but they had to be at least three hundred kilometres from the border. A man on horseback could travel that in three days. The cart standing to the side, hitched to two great carthorses, would be slower, but if the slavers

were on their way back to Karvis, it could take them as little as a week. Not much time to free himself or anyone else.

The children, he discovered, had all been chained together. An effective way of preventing escape, even if children of such differing heights and ages could work together, which they probably couldn't. The slavers paid little attention to them, talking among themselves. "How long have you stopped?" Yveni asked.

"A while," Jair said, which didn't tell him much. "I think the rain slowed them down. Too muddy."

Which meant when the ground dried, as it had already, the slavers would be off again. "Where do you sleep at night?"

"A smelly tent. I don't like it. Please, where's my sister?"

"Safe at home with your mother." Yveni prayed it was true. Had these monsters killed to rip these children from their families? He was sure they'd be prepared to. "What's your clan called?"

"Gdikini," Tilin said, stumbling over it.

"Gdikini," Yveni repeated carefully. "Now, listen to me, all of you carefully. I want you to be brave and not cry, understand?" He hugged Tilin again. "It might be a while before you can go home. You might have to work for other people, go to strange places. But remember two things. If you're ever free to come home, you must remember the name of your clan and a place called Grekil. Say that." They solemnly repeated it. "Your clan name and that place. Remind yourselves every night before you go to sleep. Each year, there's a big meeting of all the clans in Grekil. If you go there, tell people your clan name, they can tell you how to get home. Understand?"

"But how do we get to Grekil?"

"By the time you need to go there, you'll know. I don't know where your clans are right now, but that doesn't matter. Go to Grekil. It's in the north."

It wasn't much, but old man Kafoe had told him all those weeks before that children stolen by the slavers almost never came home. He thought the children couldn't find their clans again. If nothing else, Yveni could help them in that. That the children might not have come home because they hadn't survived, he didn't want to think about.

The sun grew stronger. Yveni was able to brush some of the mud from his clothes, though he was still filthy and now had welts on his face and back from the slaver's fist and whip. Still the slavers did nothing for the comfort of their captives beyond offering a cup of water. When one of the children needed to pee, he had to go right there. No privacy, no dignity, no care. Yveni raged constantly. If he'd had a sword in his hand, he would not have scrupled to kill all these bastards.

He hoped Raina had not been seriously hurt, but he knew no help would come from her clan. Jako would be grateful none of his children had been taken, and carry on his way. He might not even mention the incident to anyone at Grekil.

Two hours or so after Yveni's capture, the slavers made all the children stand and go over to the cart. Yveni only just squeezed in alongside the others, so that confirmed to him that the slavers were on their return journey. He was most likely a lucky find for them, someone they hadn't planned to capture. Just their good luck and his bad fortune.

He had to get free before they reached the Karvin border. But he would not leave if he couldn't take the children with him.

Chapter Ten

He was a little out in his calculations, because they reached the Karvin border in just four days. The guards only cursorily examined the forged sale documents purporting to be from the parents of the captive children and waved them through. If Yveni had been anyone else but the vicont of Sardelsa, he'd have risked yelling the truth at them, but since he saw coins changing hands along with the documents, he suspected the guards already knew what went on and simply didn't care.

Three hours past the border, they arrived at a rundown farmhouse by a small river. The men evicted the children from the cart and herded them down to the river. Their chains were removed and they were told to strip. The three girls were offered no modesty, though Yveni turned his back and gave them what he could. Once the children's shoes and belts were put to one side and their clothes in a pile, the men forced the children into the river to bathe. Three thin-faced women came out of the house and dumped bars of yellow soap on the bank, then scooped up the clothes and scurried off with them.

The younger children cried with the cold and could only shiver, so it was up to Yveni and the older children to help them wash with the harsh-smelling soap and clean their hair. The slavers stood on the bank and did nothing to help, their arms folded and whips held ready to use. They'd found they could more easily control Yveni by threatening or actually beating a child like Tilin as punishment for Yveni's misdemeanours than by punishing Yveni himself. He'd given up all thoughts of an escape attempt after he'd held a sobbing Tilin all night, trying to comfort him after the child had been whipped in his place for a minor offence. He couldn't risk the children suffering for something he did.

Once the children were clean, the men ordered them out of the water. Still dripping, they were told to put their shoes on and walk up to a barn near the farmhouse. There they found thin towels and a stove waiting for them. The barn was clearly used to house captives, since bunks were already set up and the doors had strong locks, quite out of place on a farm. Still, the barn was better than the cart, and sitting by the stove with the towels about their shoulders wasn't too bad. The floor was clean and laid with fresh straw, much more pleasant than mud to walk on. Yveni was under no illusion that this comfort would last.

The women returned and gave them shapeless linen shifts to dress in, and bowls of hot stew that brought a little colour back into tired, pale cheeks. The women brought buckets too—water for drinking, empty ones for toilet use.

The doors were locked and one of the slavers sat on a chair to guard them. But for the first time since their capture—much longer than Yveni had been with them—the children could move about freely and rest

on a bed, not the ground. They were all too tired and worried to play, but food and warmth made a difference to their mood. Unlike Yveni, they had no idea what might be ahead of them. Yveni wished he could be so ignorant.

If there was any likelihood of escape, now would be the time, but after assessing the barn, the locks and the guard, not to mention their lack of proper clothes and supplies, he realised the situation was as hopeless as before. If there had been another youth in the group, someone of his size, they might have been able to overpower a single guard, maybe even break the lock somehow. But on his own, he couldn't hope to, and if he failed, he would make things so much worse for the children.

His impotence depressed him, but he wanted to spare the children his foul mood. He crawled into a bunk and brooded in private. Just once in his life, he thought, he'd like to be in control of his future. Just *once*. But here he was, so close to adulthood, and still everything he did was based on decisions made by others—his father, his sister's betrothed, Gerd, Jako and now these bastards. Even if he could get free of the slavers, the children restrained his actions. He had less freedom of choice than a kardip on its way to slaughter.

"Gaelin?"

He rolled over. Tilin, rubbing his eyes. Yveni held his arms out. "What's up?"

"I'm tired. Can I sleep with you?"

"Of course."

He pulled the thin blanket over them and held Tilin tight against him. "Are we going to be here forever, Gaelin?"

"Don't think so. Don't think about it. Want me to tell you a story?"

"Uh-huh."

"How about the one about the little prince who had a big, beautiful horse called Ande?"

"Mmmm, yes, please. I like that one."

At least his privileged upbringing had been good for *something*. What would happen to Tilin in a society that let children be used as slaves? If he ever came to the throne, Yveni vowed he'd do all in his power to end this cruelty. But the prospects of becoming duc looked even more distant. Surviving the next week was as much as he could hope for, right now.

They stayed in the barn for two days. On the third, the women, whom Yveni guessed were the slavers' wives, brought the children their laundered clothes, combed their hair and washed their faces and hands. Did these women have children of their own? How they could stand by and watch other children be carted off to market like livestock? These weren't questions he could risk asking.

It was a two-hour cart ride to their final destination. Kivnic, Yveni worked out from the street and shop signs. A city then, more than a town. An important marketplace and the closest large settlement to the

border, he recalled from his studies. He hadn't known slaves were sold here, but he knew surprisingly little about this dark trade, something he regretted now. It wouldn't change anything, but it might have taken some of his fear of the unknown away. Or it might have made it worse.

The large stone-paved square at the centre of Kivnic was given over entirely to a massive market. After spending so long in tiny villages and with small groups of people, the noise and smells and bustle overwhelmed even Yveni, who'd seen this all before. To the children, it was terrifying, and he and Jair had to do their best to calm and comfort, though he didn't feel calm and Jair's eyes were full of tears. She was old enough to work out what might be happening, though he'd done his best not to fuel her anxiety. Her clan had told her stories of the slavers, and now those had become her reality.

The slavers drove the cart to an area where a lot of people stood around with pieces of paper in their hands. Yveni had no idea why or who they were. They all looked as miserable as the children, yet none were chained, so presumably they weren't slaves or prisoners. He felt like shouting Gerd's favourite line about "it could be worse" at them, but he didn't.

He and the children were unloaded from the cart and made to stand in a line while one of the slavers examined them, tidying hair and straightening tunics. When he reached Yveni, he gripped his chin.

"Now listen to me, boy." He spoke in Tetu, his voice low and harsh. "You keep your mouth shut unless a customer asks you a direct question, and that answer of yours better be the right one, or else..." He twisted Yveni's head and made him look at a building near to them with rather luxurious curtains at the windows. "That's the town brothel. They're always looking for pretty little boys, like that Tilin you're so fond of. You speak out of turn and the brat goes straight there. Got me?"

"Yes."

"Good. You can read and write, you're Uemirien, and you're fifteen. Say anything else and I'll do what I threatened."

Yveni put all the hate he felt for this bastard into his glare. The man only sneered and walked to the other end of the line.

If only the loathsome creature appreciated the irony. Yveni would have had to lie anyway, now he was on Karvin soil. Until he could escape this country, he couldn't reveal who he was or where he came from. All the slaver had done was give him fresh reason to worry about the fate of the children. How could people like that sleep at night?

Chapter Eleven

The labour market turned out to be as hopeless as Paole feared. No one under the age of twenty was available at all, and even if he could have persuaded someone older to try the trade, almost none could read and write. Those who could, didn't appeal for other reasons.

Desperation threatened to overwhelm him. He could *not* live alone any more. He couldn't. The only other choice was to give up the cabin and move permanently to a village—not to Dadel, not with Sheriff Rolf. But there would be Sheriff Rolfs everywhere he went, and those who'd known Mathias would not be there to support him.

Dispirited, he decided to leave the town, move on to the next sooner than he'd planned. But the cry of a small child caught his attention and he turned, looking past the labourers for hire. A cart had pulled up while he'd been at the bank, and in front of it...

Oh no.

Only twice in the years since Mathias had owned him had they been in Kivnic when the slaves were on sale. Both times, Mathias had sent Paole on an errand away from the square to spare his feelings.

Now the only one who could spare those was himself. Yet his feet didn't turn away from the pitiful little group waiting their turn after the labour market ended. He walked towards them, his heart racing. Could he...maybe buy them all? There weren't so many this time.

A big, broken-toothed Karvi blocked his approach. "Do you have business with us?"

"The...the children. You're selling them?"

"That's right. All legal, as you know." He looked Paole up and down as if he could work out his history just by his appearance.

"H-how much? For all of them?"

"You can't afford them."

"I asked, how much?"

"And *I* said, you can't afford them. I got buyers lined up, regular customers. Only one on free offer is the boy at the end. He's a bit old for my regulars. He's fifteen, not new to slavery. Can read and write. Has a bit of an attitude, but I'm sure a gentleman like yourself could sort that out."

"How much?"

The man smiled but there was little friendliness in it. "Well, depends on what I get offered, doesn't it? That's what an auction's all about."

"I'll offer you...two. Two hundred."

"Gold or silver?"

"Gold."

The man's eyes turned speculative. Paole had offered too much, but he didn't care. "Want to take a look at him?"

Paole nodded, his heart in his throat. Even if he could save *one*...

The boy was well formed, dark-haired and dark-eyed, in good physical condition, but angry. He glared back at Paole with none of the broken spirit of a slave.

"I'm told you can read and write," Paole asked in his stumbling Uemi.

"That's right." The tone was of someone speaking to a person well below his notice.

"How old were you when you were first enslaved?"

The boy glanced at the slaver. "I don't remember."

"How old are you now?"

"Fifteen." The boy's nostrils flared defiantly.

"Your name?"

"Gaelin."

"Clan?"

"I don't remember."

Taken young then, like the others. Paole turned to the slaver and spoke in Tetu. "You're right, he does have an attitude. One hundred."

"You said two!"

"I changed my mind. Boy looks older than fifteen to me, and he's poorly mannered. I don't think you want that to come back on you from a regular, do you?" He could have sworn the boy smirked. Maybe he spoke Tetu.

"One twenty. I'll get that much in auction, even with that mouth."

Paole doubted it but he wanted to be gone from here. "Done. Bring the notary now, I have other business I need to attend to."

The man walked off and spoke to one of his companions. Even at the reduced price, they seemed pleased. Paole didn't care—he'd have paid more, but he saw no reason to throw money away.

"I'll be your new owner, Gaelin." The boy stared straight ahead. "I know you speak this tongue, so you can knock off the act."

The boy looked at him, briefly startled, but his lips thinned. "Can I say goodbye to the others?"

Paole agreed, and the boy knelt down to the child nearest him, giving him a hug. The child burst into tears, which set the others off. The slaver watching came over, cracking his whip and cursing. He raised the whip to Gaelin, but Paole caught his hand in a crushing grip. The man stared up at him.

“My property. Don’t touch him.”

“Keep him away from mine, then.”

“Unchain him and I’ll do so willingly.”

Gaelin hadn’t moved, but at Paole’s words, he gave the child a last hug and turned to the others. “Remember what I said.” The children nodded solemnly, then he stepped back.

He’s not afraid, Paole thought, jealous and proud at the same time. Of course, Paole had only been four when he’d come to this place the first time. This one had somehow kept his spirit. He might even go home, given help.

Which would leave Paole exactly where he was before he made this impetuous deal, but so be it.

The slaver unlocked the chain linking Gaelin to the child and handed it to Paole. “Lose him and you still pay.”

“I’m aware how it works.” He almost grinned at Gaelin’s little smirk.

The first slaver returned then with a clerk to witness the transfer of ownership.

“Let’s take it to my bank so I can withdraw the money. You don’t think I walk around with coin of that amount, do you?” Paole wanted to draw their attention to that, since he didn’t like the idea of this lot ambushing him when he left the city borders, retrieving the slave and taking another little payment.

The slaver grumbled but agreed. Paole wrapped Gaelin’s chain around his hand. “Please behave yourself,” he said in a low voice. “I want us to leave without trouble.”

“I will,” Gaelin whispered back.

Pleased at the boy’s intelligence, Paole walked tall among these dishonest creatures. Gaelin imitated him, which amused him. Definitely not a broken slave there.

The business at the bank took longer than he wanted, but Gaelin sat quietly the entire time, not fidgeting or giving any appearance of being bored. One of his masters had trained him well.

But finally they were done, and the notary asked which slave mark he wanted placed on Gaelin’s arm. Paole was about to say he didn’t, but the slaver interrupted. “Already marked. Look.”

Of course he’d be marked. Paole had forgotten that. “Show us, Gaelin.”

The boy seemed genuinely confused. “On your arm, you fool,” the slaver snapped.

Gaelin frowned as he rolled up his sleeve. “But that’s…” Then he caught the slaver’s eye. “Here.”

He walked over and thrust out his arm. Paole wanted to know what he’d been about to say, but not in front of this thug. The tattoo on the forearm was a long snaking swirl with three dots. Much more elaborate than most slave marks. Paole’s was two simple crosses.

The notary recorded the symbol, then Paole signed to say he’d seen it and agreed that it belonged to the slave, Gaelin. At last they were done. The slaver stomped off, clearly glad to see the back of them.

As soon as he left the bank, Gaelin turned to Paole. “Please, you have to help the children.”

“I can’t. He wouldn’t sell them to me, he said so.”

“But he sells to the brothel, he told me!”

“He won’t, I promise you. No brothel would touch a child slave—they turn a blind eye to many things in this country, but not that.” Paole decided not to upset the boy by telling him the children could end up in a worse place than a brothel, because it might never happen. “Come, we can talk in private when I leave this place.”

“There’s nothing you can do?”

“Not now, boy, however much I want to. Come.”

He steered Gaelin away from the market square and towards the stables where he’d left the wagon. He could have spent a profitable day here, several days, but all he wanted was to leave so he didn’t have to share air with the slavers, or risk seeing those who’d buy children in that way.

As Paole flicked Peni’s reins, Gaelin asked, “Where are we going?” He continued to speak in Tetu. Perhaps he’d noted Paole was far from fluent in Uemi.

“To have a bite to eat and some tea. If that’s all right with your lordship.”

Gaelin flushed. “Sorry. It’s been a hard week or so.”

Paole patted his leg. “I’m sure. You’re safe now. Sorry about the others. If it’s any comfort, most who buy slaves pay too much to mistreat them too badly.”

“They shouldn’t buy them at all.”

“Aye, but we’re not in Uemire here. The Karvin king doesn’t give a damn about us.”

Gaelin jerked, but said nothing. Paole let him settle down as he drove out of town on the main road, and then turned off after a mile to a place he knew well, and which would not be seen by any curious or greedy slavers with ill intent.

He’d handed Gaelin the chain leash, but hadn’t taken it off completely to avoid arousing suspicion. He’d have to figure a way of doing that if Gaelin stayed with him, but of course he didn’t know that he would be. Later. They’d talk of it later.

For now, a fire and tea was what he needed and the boy would too. Once he set the fire he beckoned to Gaelin to come sit. “So, tell me the truth about you, not what the slavers told you to say. How old are you really?”

“Um, seventeen. Eighteen in two months.”

Paole lifted his eyebrows in surprise. Much older than he suspected. The boy was small for his age. “You really can read and write? In Tetu and Uemi? Where did you learn such excellent Tetu? From your previous owners?”

Gaelin’s eyes became shifty. “Um...I’ve never been a slave before. I’m not Uemirien. I’m from Tuelwetin. The duchy of Sardelsa in Tuelwetin. I was shipwrecked on the Uemire coast nearly three months ago, and was making my way to Horches when those bastards stole me from the group I was travelling with.”

“*Not* Uemirien? And you’re *not* a child?” Paole hissed in a breath in anger. He’d been taken, and taken like a damn fool. “And you went along with their lies? Why?”

“They threatened the children!”

“But you could have told me this in the bank, in front of the notary. Told him what the slavers said. Are they brothers of yours? Accomplices?”

“No! I told you, they threatened—”

“And I’m supposed to believe you, a Tueler citizen, gives a damn about those children, and would allow yourself to be enslaved to save them? When you could have been freed at the border? Called to any soldier in that town and asked for release? Liar.”

“I’m not!”

He made to jump up, but Paole grabbed the end of his leash and yanked him down. “Oh no, my pretty lad. I bought you thinking I’d set a Uemirien child free, and instead I’ve got you for all that coin. I’m thinking you owe me a great deal of money, Gaelin or whatever the hell your name is, and you can damn well work it off before you’re freed.”

“I’m not a slave.”

“Oh yes you are, and I have the papers to prove it. The only other option you’ve got is to send a message to your friends in Sardelsa or Horches, and arrange for my money to be paid back. Do that, and we’ll be quits.”

“I can’t do that,” Gaelin mumbled.

“Why not? Are they poor?”

“Yes.”

“Liar. Tell me the truth. Why can’t you send for the money?”

“I can’t.”

“Because you have no friends in either place, and you’re in league with the slavers.”

“No!”

Paole sneered. He was so angry he could barely see straight. “Then you pay me back in labour. One hundred and twenty gold coins is thirty years’ wages for a healer’s assistant.”

“Thirty years!”

“Yes. So you either find the money or get used to being a slave. I’d have set you free if you’d been of my kind, but I have no love for Tuelers or Karvi. You’re all the same.”

“We’re not.”

“Be quiet. And get up.”

With a sulky look, the boy obeyed. Paole tugged the leash and made him sit near a wagon wheel before winding the chain around a spoke and locking it off. “So you’re like them,” Gaelin spat. “I thought you were a good man.”

“I’m an ex-slave, so I know better than you what those bastards are up to. They cheated me and you’re in on it. Any time you want to tell me the truth and where your family are, we can negotiate. I’ve spent a lot of gold for nothing, and a bunch of real Uemirien children are being sold off as we speak. Don’t talk to me about ‘good’.”

The water was boiling on the fire. He dumped some leaves into the tin, took it off the heat and left it on the ground. He needed to walk this rage off. He could end up striking the boy, and he couldn’t do that, even to a liar.

Mathias always said he didn’t have a hard enough head for business. The old man had been absolutely right.

Chapter Twelve

Yveni fumed as he yanked on the chain to no avail. That bastard. How dare he say he was like those slavers! He wasn't Karvi. He didn't even have a Karvin accent.

He gave up on the chain and stared at the tea, just out of reach. He was hungry and thirsty and now, angry and worried. He couldn't be stuck with this idiot for thirty years. Thirty minutes had been enough to make him so furious he could punch him.

What now? For one brief, happy moment, he'd been sure this was his means of escape, and possibly even for the children. When he saw the pale braid and the height of the man asking about him, he hadn't dared believe a Uemirien would be the one to buy him. He thought this could be the one person he could ask for help to reach Horches, but the man's hostility had destroyed that hope. Telling him the truth would only lead to the same scepticism as Raina's, and maybe also a beating. It wouldn't get him set free.

So what to do? Escape, he supposed. Getting away from one man without weapons shouldn't be so hard, even if he overtopped Yveni by a good fifty centimetres. He looked around the camp. The gaily painted wagon was large and might hold tools, but he couldn't waste time looking. He might be able to steal the big brown horse and flee. Hard on the man, but right now, Yveni wasn't feeling that compassionate. All he had to do was be a good little slave, lull the man into a false sense of security, and take off. If he could reach the west coast of Karvis, he might be able to work his passage on a boat. This fellow had money—maybe Yveni could steal some of that too.

He groaned. How had he come to this, contemplating vulgar theft against someone whose only crime was to be rightfully angry at being cheated? But if Yveni reached Horches and gained the throne as was his right, he could send the man compensation eventually. He could send enough to buy a dozen horses.

If no better plan came to him, then that would have to do. Damn it, he shouldn't have opened his mouth. The man had been about to free him. He could have snuck back into Kivnic and found out more about the children. *Stupid, stupid, stupid.*

He heard twigs cracking under big feet, so he sat still and tried to look sorrowful. Waste of time. The man completely ignored him, poured himself some tea and fetched hardtack from the back of the wagon. He hunkered down by the fire, staring off into space.

"Um, may I have some tea too, please?"

The man shot him a glare, stood up and thrust the mug he'd been using at Yveni before rummaging around in the wagon for another one. He poured himself a drink and continued to ignore Yveni. Would he keep this up forever?

"I can't tell you the truth because more people than me are affected."

"Drop the act, boy. I know exactly what you're up to. You forgot what I said. I'm a former slave. You think if you're sweet and polite, I'll be fooled into letting you off that chain, then you'll rob me and run."

Yveni flushed hot at the accuracy of the guess. "So why aren't you still a slave? Your master didn't want you for thirty years?"

"He died. But don't go thinking killing me would solve your problem, because the slave is the first suspect. If you've all these secrets, you don't want a sheriff poking his nose in your affairs, do you?"

"Look, I'm not lying to you. I'm just not able to tell you the whole story."

"All I want, boy, is my money or the value. I know all the slave tricks, so don't be thinking you can outsmart me."

"Are you going to be like this for thirty years? Is this what you want from your life?"

"It isn't. But then again, it's not what you want either. The sooner you tell me the truth, the sooner we both get what we want."

"I can't. But you have to believe me, I've nothing to do with those men. I hate them."

There was no sign the man was convinced. "Finish your tea. I've got a lot of travelling to do today."

"Where are we going?"

"None of your business."

"Then I'm not moving. I want to know where, why and who I'm travelling with. I don't care what you think of me, but I'm not going to be treated like a dog. I didn't cheat you, they did. I was their prisoner. You're behaving the same as them. If you're really sure I'm dishonest, then take me back. They'll be there. Sell me back to them or sell me at auction. I'll lie for another buyer, if you want."

The big man's muscles bunched in his shoulders. "I said, drink up, boy."

"No." Yveni folded his arms.

The man stared at him for a long time, working his jaw, then he walked over and snatched Yveni's mug from him, tossing the tea out. He grabbed Yveni by his collar and undid the locked chain, before hauling him to his feet and over to the big horse, still waiting in harness. The man attached Yveni's chain tight to the girth, giving him almost no play and, fetching some rope, tied his hands to top of the horse's collar. "Walk or fall under her hooves. Makes no difference to me. Accidents happen to disobedient slaves all the time in Karvis. No one gives a damn."

"I don't give a damn about *you*, you bastard."

The man gave no reaction. He walked back to the fire and kicked it out, then tidied away his equipment into the wagon. Yveni refused to beg. If this idiot wanted to murder him in this way, he'd hear no snivelling from the son of Grand Duc Arkady.

The man flicked the reins and Yveni was forced to walk if he didn't want to be dragged along. An awkward position to maintain, deliberately so, but he was determined not to show his discomfort. He gritted his teeth and did his best to keep up. The horse's feet kicked up stones and road dust, and his arms were in exactly the worst position for comfortable walking. Yveni would have admired how simply the man had made this journey torture, but admiration was the last emotion he felt.

After two hours and the gods only knew how many kilometres, the man reined in the horse. Yveni clung to the horse collar, his legs trembling and his back screaming from the twisted, sideways motion.

But even then he wasn't freed. Instead the man took his time over having a piss, then stood watching Yveni with a mug of water and a piece of fruit in his hand. Yveni was starving now, and his throat felt like a desert.

"What are you trying to achieve?" he croaked.

The man took a taunting bite of the juicy fruit and swallowed it before he answered. "Teaching you the manners you never acquired."

"Me? You haven't even introduced yourself."

"Tell me your real name and where you come from, and you can have that. Otherwise, I've just paid for your unquestioning obedience. You're a slave. It's about time one of your kind learned what that meant."

To think he'd been grateful a Uemirien had bought him. He hadn't counted on a vengeful ex-slave. Yveni licked his lips, trying to wet them. "We don't have slaves in my country."

"Maybe not, but Tuelwetin never lifts a finger to help our people."

"They do! My...our duc did all he could! It's the Karvin king who won't shift."

The man grunted. "So you say. Doesn't change the fact you're lying to me."

Yveni could have screamed in frustration. "The secrets I hold are to protect people I love. My sisters, only fourteen and ten. My best friends and *their* children. They're Uemirien, if you care. There are more important things than your damn money at stake here."

"How can I believe you?"

"You can't because I can't tell you all the details. But I'm not lying. What you're doing is no different from that slaver using his whip on a child to make me do his bidding. Are you proud to be like them?"

The man looked away. "I came to Kivnic looking for an apprentice. I never expected to be lumbered with a slave. Now I have someone who'll run as soon as he gets the chance, or worse. Tell me, *Gaelin*—what would you do in my position?"

The question brought Yveni up short. "Um...I'd probably sell the slave as too much trouble."

“But I thought you didn’t have slaves in your country.”

“We don’t. I’m just answering your question.”

The man set his jaw, then came over and freed Yveni’s hands, though he didn’t unlock the chain. He pushed Yveni against the horse, letting Yveni appreciate his great height and musculature. Gods, the man was huge. Handsome in an insistent sort of way, with high cheekbones and well-shaped brows over wide, expressive eyes, though an ugly scar on his forehead marred his looks a little. The green eyes bored into him. “The day you tell me the complete truth, I’ll set you free. Or you can pay out your price. Choice is yours.”

“And until then?”

“Then you work for me, obediently and faithfully. If you talk back or disobey, you’ll be punished. I won’t strike you or whip you, but I know a hundred ways to make your life a living hell without leaving a mark on you. I had some very ‘kind’ masters who taught me all kinds of lovely tricks. I see no reason not to use them on you.”

“Then you’ll be as bad as them.”

A muscle jumped in the man’s jaw, his eyes narrowing in anger. “I’m alive, aren’t I? So will you be. And unlike me, your freedom’s in your hands. You won’t escape from me, and I won’t sell you because I’ll lose money. I need an apprentice and you’ll do until I find one.”

“Tell me what to call you and what I’ll be doing.”

The man smiled unpleasantly. “You call me ‘master’ of course. And you’ll do whatever I tell you. It’s not a slave’s place to question the master.”

“And if I refuse?”

“I think you misunderstand. I’m not offering you a choice here. I’m giving you orders. I bought you, boy. Refuse and you’ll get more of the same. If you really have a family to protect, then it’s in their interest for you to stay alive and behave.”

Damn the bastard, but he was right. Didn’t mean Yveni wouldn’t try to escape if he could. “I hate you.”

“Good. You, I simply despise for being a thief. Now, you can ride if you behave, or you can walk.”

The man regarded him, taking his time drinking his water. Yveni dared not push him, not now. But his thirst drove him to ask for one tiny concession. “May I have a drink?”

The man stepped back and poured some water into his mug from the canteen hanging on the side of the wagon. It was only a couple of mouthfuls, not enough to slake Yveni’s thirst, but it eased his throat. “More when we stop later. Nothing if you give me any more cheek.”

Yveni thought about snapping back, but there was a relentlessness to this man that he didn’t want to test. The loathing in those green eyes was real. “I understand, master.”

The man nodded and undid the chain. No chance of making a break for it—the man’s fist was nearly the size of Yveni’s head, and he was strong as a bull kardip in breeding flesh. Besides, it would be wise to be clear of Kivnic before he made any plans. The man might travel close to a port, and that would be a better place to escape.

As the man shoved him up into the passenger seat and fastened the chain to the side, Yveni risked a question. “May I ask about those children? What will happen to them?”

“Don’t know. If they’re lucky they’ll be taken into a family business and treated decently.”

He didn’t say what would happen if they weren’t. “Will they ever be freed?”

“Some might. Usually young slaves are sold a few times. The girls will be bred to make more slaves.” The man clenched his fist. “I hate those people.”

“So do I.”

The man’s expression revealed nothing of whether he believed Yveni or not. Probably not, but it didn’t matter. It was the truth, and when Yveni became grand duc, he’d dedicate himself to ending the slave trade in Karvin, if it took the rest of his life.

Chapter Thirteen

Paole couldn't believe the mess he'd made of his life in a single morning. How had he ended up with a prisoner, of all things? A slave, no less. And he couldn't even manage to purchase an ordinary slave. No, he had to end up with a mouthy, clever, obstinate brat with all these secrets, and a determination to escape the second he had a chance to.

The smartest thing to do would be turn around and dump him in Kivnic, gold or no gold. The boy was trouble, and certainly no companion. Paole would have to watch everything he did or he'd end up with poisoned patients and spoiled medicines.

Damn the boy! Why couldn't he be honest? Paole could forgive him not being Uemirien but not knowing if the boy was in with the slavers, or a cruel victim of circumstance, irritated him worse than a boil on the groin.

Maybe he *should* go back to Kivnic. He bit his lip, thinking. He'd just spent a fifth of what Mathias had left him, though he'd earned more in the last year. The loss of the gold stung but it wasn't a mortal blow. The worst of it was to have spent the money and still be alone. If he sent this brat back to his possible masters, he'd have given the slavers a profit twice over and be left with nothing.

If the boy were honest, he could ask for a promise of a year, at least. More time to find an apprentice. But he couldn't trust anything "Gaelin" said. The boy certainly had *sounded* sincere when he talked of his sisters, his friends, but Paole had known all too many people who could lie as convincingly to his face, and some were younger than this creature.

He only paid half a mind to his driving as this ridiculous problem chased around and around in his head. He didn't *want* a slave. He didn't want anyone to be a slave, even this boy.

"Careful!" Gaelin grabbed his hand holding the reins. "You nearly had us in a ditch then."

Paole tugged on the reins, but Peni, clever horse that she was, had already corrected the error. He brought her to rest and put his hands over his face. "I don't *want* this!"

"I'm sorry."

Paole sneered. "Hah, I bet."

"No, I am. I know you were trying to help us captives, and I hoped you could have helped the children. I'd give anything to be back in the slavers' hands, if they could be safe. Tilin..." Paole looked over. The boy's eyes were red. "He's only seven. He missed his mother, his sister. He tried to be brave for me, but I abandoned him." Gaelin bit his lip.

“Was that the child you hugged?”

“He took a whipping for me,” he whispered. “I asked a question out of turn, and they punished him because they knew that would hurt me more. Please...there must be something you can do.”

“There isn’t. Only if the king made slavery illegal, and the court’s too fond of its slaves. The slavers pay bribes, and no one wants to cut off their extra cash.”

“When I’m—” He stopped, flushing.

“When you’re...?”

“Older. When I’m older, I’ll do something.”

“Naught you can do, boy, unless you had enough gold to buy every slave in Karvis.”

“I told them to remember their clan and to go to Grekil if they were ever freed. It was all I could do.”

He sounded so credible, so moved. Paole *wanted* to believe him. He didn’t dare. “Best not to think about them,” he said roughly. “It’ll only hold you back.”

The boy shot him a startled look. “You sound like...someone I knew. Someone who died in the shipwreck. A friend.”

“Well, I’m no friend. Touching as this all is, Gaelin, I don’t trust you as far as I can throw this wagon. I’ve set down the deal. Choice is up to you. Until then, hold your tongue.”

“Yes, master.”

The flat tone held no trace of insolence. Nothing to react to or punish. Another act, of course. Paole *hated* dishonesty. Why of all the slaves he could have bought, did he end up with this boy?

His irritation grew as he discovered another difficulty keeping an unwilling prisoner brought him. His normal routine when he arrived in a town, same as Mathias’s had been, was to make a camp just outside and go in on foot with what he needed, occasionally taking Peni if he was collecting materials or supplies. Mathias had always taken Paole with him, and even sent him off to deal with patients on his own, as Mathias’s age meant he could do less than was demanded of him. But Paole couldn’t turn up to see people with a slave on a chain. Mathias had never chained him, had never needed to. Gaelin would run off as soon as Paole unleashed him.

So he was forced to drive into town, leaving the boy chained to the wagon while he visited the ironmongers for what he needed, then head out to where he planned to make camp. He had to make sure there was a tree sturdy enough for the purpose, since he didn’t dare leave the brat with easy access to the wagon and all its tools in the back.

Gaelin resisted as Paole dragged him over to the tree. “Why are you chaining me up here?” he demanded as Paole fastened the lock on the new longer chain and tested it. “What have I done now?”

“Nothing, and that’s the way I want it to stay.”

“But what if it rains, or I need to eat?”

Blast it. Paole hadn't considered that. "Then you'll get wet." The sky was clear, so there was no risk today, but it was something else to worry about. "I'll leave you food and water."

"Is there no task you want to set me?"

Paole had a dozen things a trustworthy apprentice could be set to, but nothing for this boy. "No, and mind your tongue."

"I just want to be useful, master."

Paole felt like rolling his eyes.

"Is there not even a book I could read?"

He supposed that was reasonable, though he suspected the boy's motives. "I'll see if there's something. Now, no more demands, or you'll do without food and water until tomorrow."

"I understand, master."

Again that flat tone which carried no obvious insult, but it still managed to sting. Perhaps it was just Paole's guilty conscience. Better not to engage with him at all, until he felt calmer.

He left the boy with Kusa's *Herbalist*, since it was replaceable if the brat decided to damage it, as well as the canteen of water, some fruit and dried meat. He'd buy bread in the town and other supplies. Something else to consider—he'd have to buy enough for two now. And what about the winter? He nearly groaned. He hadn't thought this through in the least.

He did his best to lose his foul temper before he reached the town again, but Addler the healer still quirked an eyebrow at him. "Something biting you, Master Paole?"

"Not really. Just some business in Kivnic that went awry."

"Someone said they thought you had a companion with you as you came through earlier."

"Aye. Giving a lad a ride towards Sunik."

Addler lifted the other eyebrow in surprise, but Paole didn't elaborate on the lie. Let people chatter. Better that than they learned the truth.

He bought supplies, spread the word he was in town, called in on two of Mathias's regular patients and spent time socialising, all the time with his mind half on the brat back at his camp and what mischief he might be up to. When he returned that evening, he was so wound up to expect a problem, that finding the boy quietly reading and causing no difficulty whatsoever didn't appease his annoyance at all.

He held out his hand for the book. "Give it to me."

The boy frowned but handed the volume over without further argument. None of the pages had been folded over, and Paole could see no food or drink stains on the cover. Normally, this would please him, but his irritation overrode everything. "I didn't damage it."

"I told you to mind your tongue."

Gaelin's mouth snapped shut. Paole instantly regretted his temper, but he couldn't apologise to the boy because that would show weakness. Instead he put the supplies and book away, and tried to calm down. He was a wreck after a few hours owning this boy. Such a dreadful mistake he'd made.

He fetched a fresh bread roll from his new purchases, thinking to offer that instead of an apology. He found Gaelin talking to Peni and scratching her jaw. "Leave her alone."

"I was just—"

"I said, leave her alone!"

Gaelin stepped back at his bellow, and Peni whinnied in distress. Paole closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He opened his eyes, and held out the bread. "Here. That'll tide you over until I make supper."

The boy took the bread and mumbled a wary "thank you". He made sure to keep well away from Peni and from Paole both.

Paole walked off. This wouldn't work. After he finished in town, he'd return to Kivnic and leave Gaelin there. The slavers would be gone, and the boy would have to fend for himself. He was smart enough, and there were the mysterious friends he couldn't bring himself to tell Paole about. They could help him.

The decision made, he felt calmer. Better to put this stupidity behind him and find another way to make it through the winters. At least this way he'd only be hurting himself.

Gaelin was back under the tree when he returned, the roll already eaten. Time to make the fire and put on the beans he'd had soaking. The boy said nothing until Paole had the fire laid and the beans and dried meat cooking.

"You could leave me that kind of thing to do."

"No thanks."

The boy sighed. "My friend has that book. She had one she said was better though, from Uemire. Hosta's *On Medicinals*. Do you know it?" He'd switched to Uemi to ask the question.

Paole answered in Tetu. "One, I don't read Uemi because I was a child when I was abducted, and two, stop trying to be nice."

The boy straightened up, haughty indignation on his pretty features. "I'm not *trying*. I'm not the one in a bad mood all the time. I enjoyed the book. Sofia used to dose her family, and us. She sometimes read to us from that book. I didn't know what it all meant but it sounded interesting. Is that what you do? Make medicine?"

Paole knew better than to answer, but he did anyway. "Yes. I'm a healer, though not certificated. I have the Healing Sight."

"Oh, like Raina." The enthusiasm sounded real. "I was travelling to Grekil with her clan. I thought it was a rare gift, though."

"It is."

Who *was* this boy? So friendly with Uemiriens, yet possibly in league with slavers. Open about his friends, but not about his family or his destination. “Why won’t you tell me the truth?” he murmured to himself.

“Because the people who are after me will kill me, you and those who helped me, like my friends.”

Paole narrowed his eyes at the boy. “After you? Have you committed a crime?”

“Only to be born.” He said it with such bitterness, Paole could *not* believe it was fake. “I’m heir to property someone else wants. If they kill me, nothing stands in their way.”

“But then you could go to the law. The sheriffs or whatever you have in Sardelsa.”

“Not that simple. I really wish I could tell you, but Karvis is...well, the person after me has ties here.”

That made no sense. How much power could one person have? “Now you’re making it up again.”

“No, I’m not. But this is why it’s pointless to talk to you. I have trouble believing it sometimes. I’m not surprised you do.”

Paole’s determination to rid himself of this boy wavered again. What if he was telling the truth? “If I set you free, where would you go?”

“To Horches. My friend has relatives there. I’d be safe.”

“I only want the truth, Gaelin. All of it.”

“I know. If I gave you my word to work for you for three years, would you let me go after that?”

Why three years? “Not exactly a bargain for me.”

“I’m sorry, but if I don’t return home then, my sisters will be left to suffer.”

Paole shook his head. “I gave you the deal. It’s more than most masters would offer.”

The boy grimaced. “You’re not being fair.”

“Fairer than anyone treated me at your age. Move back and keep quiet. I have things to do.”

Chapter Fourteen

The man was likely to drive him insane. One minute he sounded almost reasonable, and the next he bit Yveni's head off for something completely trivial. Maybe *he* was insane. Maybe being a slave had made him unstable. There was that remark about slaves being the first suspect in a master's murder, too. Maybe there was a darker reason for that comment.

Shame, because being a healer's assistant until he reached his majority wouldn't only be a good cover, it would also be interesting. Working with Raina had been fascinating, and he hadn't lied about Sofia and her medicines.

As he watched the man chop wood, prepare vegetables for supper, shake out the bedrolls—chores Yveni would have been happy to help with—he considered what to do. He was in no position to make a run for it, and being a slave would keep the scrutiny of the authorities away from him for now. Maybe in time, he could win the man's trust and even enlist his help. Nothing would be gained by antagonising him, even if Yveni simply existing did that.

He could easily give the man a year. He still had Gil's letter and pendant. Arriving in Horches even after all that time would do him no harm if he had this proof. Konsatin couldn't declare him dead for years, even with the consent Serina would never give.

How could Yveni make the experience endurable for both of them? Maybe the man's anger would diminish—he had good reason to be upset right now. Yveni would try to be as open as he could, share what was safe. If he showed him Gil's letter, as he had done to Raina, it might convince the man, but he didn't want to risk it yet. They were too close to the border and to Kivnic. For all he knew, this fellow might decide to turn Yveni over to the authorities for whatever reward Konsatin offered, as a way to win back his lost money.

He leaned back against the tree. He ached all over, and a persistent fatigue headache hovered behind his eyes. Tilin's miserable face kept coming into his thoughts. Gerd's advice applied here, but it was very hard not to worry about the children, however useless it was. He needed a distraction.

The man returned from collecting firewood, dumping it near the wagon. He spent some time inside the wagon, emerging with a collection of bottles and pots in two crates apparently constructed specially to hold them, and a little folding table and chair. He sat down near the fire with an oil lamp and began to set out the bottles. Medicines, Yveni guessed.

"Sir, may I help?"

The man looked at him with narrowed eyes. "Come over here."

There was just enough play in the chain to obey, and the man told him to sit. "Do you know how to use a mortar and pestle?" Yveni nodded. "Then pound this as fine as you can." He placed leaves and dried berries into the mortar and handed it to Yveni.

While Yveni worked, the man went to the wagon and returned with a delicate set of scales, along with a number of paper wallets. He began to measure out small amounts of this or that powder into the wallets, sealing them with a dab of glue and writing on them with a surprisingly elegant hand. Where had he learned to read and write? And who had taught him the Uemi he spoke so badly? It was more than a four-year-old would know, but hardly fluent. Yveni found himself very curious to know more about this man, so contradictory in so many ways.

"What's this used for?" He nodded at the leaves he was grinding. The mixture gave off a pleasing rich odour he didn't recognise.

"Cough."

"And it works?"

"I'm not a thief, boy. I don't dispense what doesn't work."

"I meant no offence."

The man grunted, still not looking at him. But he answered Yveni's other questions civilly enough, without offering anything unprompted. The range of conditions he prescribed for wasn't vast—he made no claims to cure serious illness, at least not from what he prepared this evening. Most were minor but troubling ailments, or the chronic conditions of the elderly.

"You must come through these places all the time."

"No."

Yveni waited, rather than risk angering him again. Eventually the man spoke, his voice low and polite. When he spoke like that, he sounded quite pleasant.

"Mostly I leave prescriptions. I offer diagnosis through my gift, and drugs to try, with a script they can fill with their local healer or herbalist. If I discover a serious ailment, I work with their regular healer. Some prefer what I dispense, some have tried everything else and want something new. If I'm there when someone's ill at the time, I can offer some relief. A proper healer can do surgery, offer full facilities, but they cost more, and the older people liked...like me. I treat the poor too, when I can."

"You've been doing it a long time?"

"Ten years."

"So what did you do before?"

The man sat back. "Nosy, aren't you? For someone so close-mouthed about his own background."

"I'm sorry. I'll tell you as much as I can, but it won't be enough."

The man made a face. "Give me that." He took the mortar, examined the contents, which appeared to meet his requirements, and started to measure it out the same as he had with the others. Yveni could only watch.

"I could do that," he offered. "Measure things, if you gave me instructions."

"No thanks. I won't have a patient made ill by your mischief."

"Did you ever play a trick like that?"

The man glared. "Of course not."

"Then why would I? I can't believe you were happy to be a slave either."

"I never lied to anyone."

"Never? And what secrets could a child have? Did you have anyone to protect?"

"Are you trying to anger me, boy?" The man's voice hadn't risen, but he managed to convey his anger in his tone, making it clear that he could back it up with a body much larger and heavier than Yveni's, so he'd better watch his mouth.

"No. I'm trying to make this work, sir. If you believe I'd hurt you or anyone else, then take your knife and cut my throat, since you won't sell me. A thief, which I'm not, isn't a murderer, which I'm not either."

The man pretended to ignore him as he continued to measure out the leaf powder into precise amounts and seal the wallets with care. Yveni waited. Somehow he had to get through to him.

The man collected all his sealed wallets up, put them in the wagon and tidied his other equipment away. By now it was full dark, and Yveni was cold. He didn't dare ask for a coat or a blanket, but he wondered where he would sleep since the man was so protective of his possessions.

The man said not a word as he built up the fire and stirred the bean stew. He stared into the pot for a long time, his eyebrows drawn together as if he had a headache. What was he thinking? Yveni wished he could read his mind.

The man rose, fetched two metal bowls and doled out a generous portion for Yveni. The smell was delicious, but even if it had been horrible, he would have eaten it gladly. The slavers hadn't been generous with their food, and being cold made him even hungrier.

The man didn't touch his own portion. He left it on his lap and looked up at Yveni. "What's your real name?"

Could he tell him this? Was the risk worth it? He decided it was. "Yveni. Of Sardelsa. But I beg you, don't use that name in public."

The man's gaze drifted away, as if he turned this information over in his mind and needed to consider the implications. Then he looked at Yveni with unerring intelligence in his sharp eyes. "If you've never been a slave, what's the mark on your arm?"

"My family does that to all its members when they turn fourteen. It's their symbol, their sign."

"Never heard of the practice before."

“No. It’s only the highborn who do it.”

“So you’re some fancy lord or something.”

“Something, yes. Please don’t endanger my sisters by spreading it around.”

The man lifted his spoon, but still didn’t eat. “If you played me false over the drugs, and someone took ill or died, we’d both swing.”

“I understand. I truly do. But since you have the cost of feeding me, and you paid so much money, why not put me to work?”

The man shook his head. “I wanted an apprentice, someone I could train and pass the practice over to. Half the work is training. It’d be wasted on you. You have no interest in healing, and if you’re freed or escape, you won’t even use it. The knowledge will be gone, lost.”

“Then sell me. I don’t see how my telling you the truth would change things. You’d let me go and you’d be no better off.”

“Tell me now and we can save ourselves the wasted time.”

Yveni drew himself up and gave the man his haughtiest look—the one Lady Surenyev would use on him when he spoke too loudly at a court function. “I know you no better than you know me, master. I can trust you no more than you can me. You want to know out of injured pride. I can’t tell you because it could mean my life and harm to others.”

“So you say.”

“And I’ll keep saying it because it’s the truth. The decision’s yours, isn’t it? You have a willing assistant if you want one, but I can’t give you my parole because at some point I need to reach Horches. Unless you set me free, I have to try and escape.”

The man frowned. “You argue like a lawyer.”

“I was raised to run an...estate. A big one. I’ve had to learn many things, including the law.”

“I see.” He ate a little, his mind clearly running over all Yveni had said.

Please, he begged the man silently as he ate his own meal. See reason, for both our sakes.

The man set his bowl down. “It changes nothing. You’ll need to be chained, or you’ll run. I won’t take a chained slave with me to the town. I can give you tasks here, and you can read my books, but what good will it do?”

“Be company? Be some help? Is it not a lonely life, master?”

The man jerked and stared at Yveni who looked back as calmly as he could. “My father always told me that no teaching is wasted, and no knowledge is lost in passing it on. If you find an apprentice, on that day I’ll tell you my secret and you can let me go. But whatever I learn from you, I wouldn’t consider it a waste of time, sir.”

“Then learn it and do what you will with it, boy. I’ll keep your name safe, if it means so much. But you’re still Tueler and no friend of mine. Remember that.”

“I will. Thank you.”

The decision eased some of the tension in the man, for he tidied up without the grim expression of before, and answered with more than bare civility when Yveni asked where he should relieve himself and if he could help with setting up for the evening. Yveni probably wouldn’t make a friend of him as he had out of Raina, but maybe he’d learn something useful and hopefully be of some help. All in all, things could have been worse, considering how the day began.

Paole lay in the tent, listening to his unwanted possession breathe deeply in sleep. He simply didn’t know what to make of the boy at all. He could ask no one for advice, not here, and it would be months before he reached Dadel.

All he could do was try to make this work and keep searching for an apprentice. The boy had given him a graceful out there. More than Paole expected, to be honest. If it took a year to find a real assistant, then it was no great matter to either of them. The puzzling thing was that Yveni—or Gaelin as he should keep calling him, he supposed—was in no hurry to leave. What could be so important that he had to reach Horches at all costs, but apparently be of little enough consequence that it didn’t matter *when*?

He had to admit the boy had kept his mind busy today. Strange that one so young should think of company as a benefit of having a slave. The boy was strange in almost every way. Pity he was Tueler. The people of Tuelwetin probably didn’t take slaves because it was too much trouble. They had no better morals than the Karvi.

He rolled over. Needed to sleep. He had a long day ahead of him and a slave with a wit sharp enough to cut meat. Mathias never had to deal with this kind of thing.

Chapter Fifteen

The chain complicated everything, but his owner approached the problem with a better will after they'd reached their uneasy agreement. He left Yveni with food, water, reading material and tasks that didn't require him to go into the wagon or use tools like the axe. He trusted Yveni with a knife, probably because he could damage Yveni far worse with his big fists before Yveni came close to seriously injuring him, and so the cooking and food preparation fell to Yveni entirely. He didn't mind being left in the camp—it meant not having to avoid the authorities in town or maintaining a Karvin accent he was by no means sure would pass close inspection. The less curiosity concerning him, the better.

He had plenty to do once the man decided to trust him with chores. Yveni quickly realised the man had little skill at living off the land and spent money on food from the towns they passed through rather than catching or collecting it. He didn't even make his own bread, apart from a tasteless flat kind that was more like punishment than food. A week after their ill-fated meeting, Yveni surprised him with a loaf cooked in a tin among the ashes. The man stared at it in amazement, and his eyes lit up when he tasted a still-warm slice. "This is good."

"Yes. And easy too. Why don't you trap gaete? Or rabbits? Or catch your own fish?"

The man looked at the ground and mumbled, "Never learned how. None of my masters lived in that way."

"I could show you. I don't even have to be unchained."

"Why?"

"Because I can show you how to make the—"

"No, why show me? Why bother?"

Yveni sat back. "Because gaete and rabbits taste good, and they're free. You're teaching me things, so let me teach you too."

"I'm keeping you prisoner."

Yveni sighed. "I have to eat, don't I? Besides, I don't hold it against you. I told you that. I want to be free, but you're not my enemy."

"You're strange."

Yveni grinned. "Raina said that too. Now, want to learn how to make a gaete trap?"

The man's big, nimble hands meant making the trap from green twigs and twine was child's play for him. It took two days before his efforts bore any result, but on the last evening before he planned to move

on to the next town, he checked the trap and came back to the camp with a fine male gaete kicking and squealing in the cage.

“Well done!” Yveni greeted him. “But you don’t look very pleased.”

The man thrust the cage towards him. “Take it. I don’t know what to do with it.”

He was in such a hurry to be rid of the trap into Yveni’s hands, Yveni nearly dropped it. “We have to kill it. Do you object to that?”

“I don’t know how. And I don’t want to watch.”

“I could set it free...”

“No. Do it. I’ll...go get some wood.”

Breaking the animal’s neck was the work of a moment, and something Yveni had done dozens of times. It didn’t bother him the way killing the sickly calf had done. He’d seen gaete hunted by birds of prey killed in much crueller ways.

But as he slit the gaete’s throat to let the blood drain, he wondered if the problem had been the cage, more than the killing. Yveni was new to this, but the man had been a slave all his life, more or less. Damn, he should have thought of that.

The man came back nearly an hour later, his arms full of wood, his expression unsmiling. “All dealt with,” Yveni said. “Do you want to eat it tonight?”

“Uh...will it keep a day?”

“If it’s hung up, certainly. Um, I could teach you another kind of trap. Not using a cage, if you like.”

The man stiffened. “It’s not that...or maybe it is. The trap works, that’s all that matters. I know killing it was necessary. I didn’t know how... I’ve never killed anything before. I didn’t want to make it suffer.” As he spoke, his eyes kept shifting from Yveni’s bloodied hands, to the discarded cage and to the dead animal. The distress was clear, but Yveni couldn’t fathom the cause, if it wasn’t about the cage.

“I can show you that knack. For when I’ve gone.”

“Fine. Yes, do that. I’ll bring you some water to wash up in.”

With the chain, Yveni couldn’t reach any place to hang the beast. The man would have to deal with it, if he could.

He returned with a pail of water and a cloth, and left Yveni to it while he heated up the remains of last night’s stew. With fresh bread, it was fine, and Yveni had made some little cakes with nuts and berries garnered from near the camp.

“I’m not a very good cook,” the man confessed.

“My friend Sofia taught us all. And Gil taught me more about field cooking.”

The man hunched over his food, his green eyes sad and distant. “When I saw you with the gaete...I had a memory of someone...someone from my clan, I suppose. Holding a dead animal like that. No faces,

no names.” He looked up. “If I’d been left to grow up with them, I’d know how to trap and kill and prepare food.”

“Do you have no idea what the clan was?”

“None. I was the only child taken that day, and the other captives were too young to talk about it. All I knew was my name. Paole.” He said it firmly, fixing Yveni with his eyes.

Yveni bowed his head, appreciating the gesture. “Thank you for telling me. If you returned to Uemire—”

“What good would it do? I speak little of the tongue, I know almost nothing of their ways.”

“You’re one of their own. Wouldn’t someone in your family remember a child with that name, taken that way?”

“For all I know, my family are dead.”

“Not for sure, though. If you found them...would you go home?”

“I don’t know. I remember crying for my mother, but I can’t remember her face.”

“I only remember mine a little. Have you been treated badly all this time?”

Paole’s expression hardened, closed in. “Not all. Best not to talk of it.”

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to offend.”

“You didn’t. But you’ll start imagining things about those children and you don’t want that. Not all masters are cruel. My last one was fair and kind.”

Of course now Yveni wanted to know about the less kind ones, but Paole was right. He could do nothing for Tilin and the others, except worry. “I don’t know how men could do this to children. Men with wives and maybe children of their own.”

Paole grimaced and tossed his crumbs away into the darkness with unnecessary force. “They see Uemiriens as animals. They think we’re uneducated savages, that we’re witches and thieves and put curses on their livestock. Happy enough to use our gifts when it suits them and to train our children to do the dirty, hard work, or to—” He stopped suddenly, as if realising he’d gone too far. “Our country’s poor and our people may not have all the fancy tools the Karvi make, but I’ve never met a Uemirien who’d steal a child or do what some here will do to their slaves.”

“My father was very fond of your people. He appointed Gil to his...estate, even though many grumbled about him hiring a foreigner.”

“You hold him in high regard.”

“I miss the two of them so much. All my life they’ve been there to help. And I *will* see them again.”

Paole’s eyes went straight to the chain around Yveni’s waist. The regret was clear, yet he said nothing. One day, maybe sooner than Yveni had hoped, Paole would set him free and be happy to do so. Nothing would be gained by pushing the man.

Yveni stood. “I’ll clear up.”

“Right.” Paole smiled a little. “Early start tomorrow. Moving on to the next town.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Thanks for the cakes. I didn’t know you could cook those on a campfire.”

“They’re easy. I’ll show you.”

“You do that. And I’ll show you how to make a drawing paste for boils and splinters. Even the Karvin king can get a boil on his arse.”

“He *is* a boil on an arse, everyone says.”

Paole laughed. “So he is. But mind your tongue. They say he has eyes everywhere.”

“Everyone says that too. I’ll be careful.”

Paole grunted and stood. Yveni started to clear up, and set water on to boil up the utensils.

As he waited for the water to heat, and Paole went off to use the latrine, Yveni thought about what he’d learned—and what he hadn’t. He’d thought Paole possibly a little mad—now he wondered how he’d managed to stay so sane, with all he’d lost. Yveni’s childhood had been happy and surrounded by love from parents and foster parents alike. Had anyone ever read Paole a story at night? Cuddled him until he slept? Taught him something for pleasure and not for use? Sofia had taught Yveni how to cook as a way of cheering up a little boy who missed his mother. No one would do that for Tilin, and no one had done it for Paole.

He felt himself becoming quite emotional about the lost childhoods, old and new, and forced back both feelings and rising tears. He had to be strong. Pity for something he couldn’t change, and which wasn’t even wanted, took energy he needed to get through this. Paole’s situation was not of Yveni’s making, and now he’d been freed, the man could do whatever he wanted with his life. He hadn’t asked for and didn’t need Yveni’s help.

Yveni still hoped that somehow all the children would go home. Maybe one day Paole would too.

The next town was three days’ driving. On the way, Paole occasionally broke into conversation. Never about his past, not specifically, though some of what he spoke about was from his slave days. He talked freely about his patients and his work, what he could do and what his limitations were. When he fell silent, Yveni talked of Sardelsa, but also of Raina and her clan, and of Gil’s tales from his childhood. Paole never spoke or asked questions of Yveni about these things, but his eyes were intent, and he listened with concentration. Yveni didn’t doubt that his every word was filed away in Paole’s memories.

Hunting edible plants and small animals formed his other entertainment. Yveni knew some of the creatures and bushes only from his studies, but Paole showed him which of the plants were toxic or medicinal, though it hadn’t occurred to him to eat them as food. Paole knew little of preparing meat to keep over the winter, drying, smoking and salting, or how to treat hides. Gil had taught Yveni some small-goods leatherworking, including the making of shoes and gloves. Yveni promised Paole’d have a new pair of

driving gloves made from gaete hide before the month was out. The flush of pleasure this promise gave the big man made Yveni's heart lift in a way it had not since he'd lost contact with Raina. He *liked* making Paole's life better. Little things meant a great deal to the healer. For Yveni, he felt less like he was kicking his heels until he attained his majority and could actually *do* something with his life.

They arrived at Paole's favoured camping spot just before sunset, and Paole set off for the town just after dawn. He'd be gone all day, so Yveni had time to work on the glove leather as well as on the other chores that fell to him, and the exercises he carried out to keep some semblance of fitness. The weather was warm, the day bright and clear, and Paole had chosen a lovely spot to pitch camp, on the banks of a pretty stream, the grass lush and the plants and bushes all in flower. Were it not for the chain, Yveni could consider it as a welcome break from his duties. Pretend it was a day out in the ducal forests, with his father and Gil and the court, hunting, and practicing the art of woodcraft.

But his father was dead, and he would not see those forests for years. He had to be content with what he really had, and his enslavement. He felt Paole was edging closer to freeing him. The man hated the situation and he only needed a way out of it that satisfied his curiously strong sense of honour, even if he had to consider the slave price lost for good. Yveni took great care not to say anything that might sound impatient on the subject. Paole had to reach that decision himself.

The leather tanning and working was a messy job, but once the gaete skins had been prepared, he could put them to all kinds of uses. Something else to show Paole. Yveni looked forward to that. But when he finished fiddling with the skins, he could turn his mind to breadmaking and the night's supper. He smiled to think what Serina would say if she could see him. Their father had never made bread. If the duchy were ever in financial difficulties, maybe he could set up a bakery to supplement the ducal incomes.

But then his thoughts turned to what state the duchy would be in after Konsatin had finished with it, and his mood darkened. He had to make himself stop dwelling on it. He wished Paole would return and distract him. Much easier when there was someone else around to avoid such thoughts.

It annoyed him a little that Paole's return near to sunset made him so happy, like he really was some damn slave waiting for his master to come home and pet him. But it did make him happy, and his smile brought an answering grin from the man. "You've been cooking. I can smell it."

"All afternoon. If you'd come home earlier, you'd be complaining about the stink from the leathers."

"Well, I didn't, so no harm. Brought you something." Paole set down the packs he carried and drew out a parcel wrapped in cheap sacking. "There was a second-hand clothing wagon in the town, so I picked out two shirts and some trousers. Those you're wearing won't last you. Had to guess the size."

"A skill a slaveowner needs."

Paole's smile dropped.

"I'm only joking," Yveni hastily added. "Can I see?"

The clothes were old and patched, but the cloth was stout and the stitching sound. Yveni stripped to his loincloth to try on the trousers, not thinking about modesty at all—not after the wreck and the beach and travelling with Raina’s clan. But when he looked up to tell Paole that the pants seemed to fit well enough, he found the man had turned quite red. “Oh, should I have waited?”

“No.” Paole coughed. “They look fine, boy. Just tighten your belt a little, keep them up. I’ll go and—”

He stopped and looked past Yveni’s shoulder. Yveni turned and found a youth standing by the edge of the camp.

“Master Paole,” the boy said quietly, “you said it was—”

“Yes. Um, Gaelin, I...won’t be sleeping in the tent tonight. You should be fine on your own. It’s safe, hereabouts.”

Yveni looked from the pretty, wide-eyed youth to Paole. “Of course, master. What about supper?”

“Wrap up some bread for me, boy.” He turned to the youth. “Be with you soon.”

He went around the back of the wagon and into it. Yveni smiled at the visitor. “I’m Gaelin.”

“Kurt. Why are you wearing a chain?”

“Uh...I don’t want to talk about it.”

Kurt flushed. “Sorry.”

“It’s all right. Do you know Master Paole well?”

He shook his head. “Not really. He treated my father for his haemorrhoids. We’re not rich. Master Paole lets us pay in kind. It’s a great help.”

The boy held nothing in his hands. So what was he bartering? A sick, cold feeling began to curdle in Yveni’s stomach. “Is that why you’re here?”

“Yes.” The boy wrinkled his forehead in confusion. “I heard from...my friend. We all know about Master Paole, from when he was here last year.”

“Did he let your friend pay in kind too?”

“Oh yes. Some of the healers are too proud for that.”

Yveni gritted his teeth. “Not surprised.”

Paole emerged from the wagon with blankets in his hands. “Have you got the bread, Gaelin?”

“Yes, master.”

Paole shot him a glance for his cold tone. Yveni didn’t care. He might throw up. To think he had been planning to make *gloves* for this bastard.

He shoved the bread, still in its tin, at Paole. “Don’t need the whole thing, boy.”

“Do what you want with it, *master*. I’m not hungry.”

Paole’s eyes narrowed in anger, but he clearly didn’t want to chastise Yveni in front of Kurt. “As you like.” He gestured to Kurt. “Come on, boy.”

Yveni wanted to yell at Kurt that he didn't need to go along with such an illegal and immoral bargain, but the two disappeared from sight in seconds, and the opportunity was lost.

He leaned against the wagon and cursed quietly. What a fool he'd been to believe Paole's claims of such high ideals. Kurt barely looked Yveni's age, was likely younger. Paole had no business exploiting children to sate his lust. Kurt hadn't looked worried, but then he said he didn't know Paole. Perhaps knew nothing of what would be done to him.

Yveni knew little either, but he had some theoretical knowledge, and Raina had made some jokes from time to time that he'd worked out eventually. It wasn't unnatural or forbidden by the gods, but for Paole to let a boy like that sell himself to pay for treatment of his father's *piles*? No priest would look away from that. The gods gave children as a gift, not to be abused.

Maybe Paole's time as a slave had twisted him, made him lose all sense of decency. Yveni didn't know and right now, didn't care. Whatever the reasons, his *master* was a damn hypocrite.

Chapter Sixteen

Kurt was a virgin, Paole discovered. But eager and sweet and grateful to be taught something of the way between men with a bit of gentleness. Paole wished he could persuade the boy to leave with him, but his family needed all their offspring to work with them. “You’re beautiful,” he murmured, kissing the boy’s hair in the predawn light.

“So are you. Piet said you were wonderful. He was right.”

Paole smiled. “He’s kind. I didn’t see him in town this time.”

“They’ve gone reed cutting. He’ll be sorry he missed you.”

“Next time, I hope. And you, maybe?”

“Oh yes.” Kurt gave him a brilliant smile. “Master Paole, why don’t you have a lover? Is Gaelin?”

“No, he’s...working for me.”

“Why is he wearing a chain?”

“Uh...well, it’s punishment. He, uh, keeps running off to do what he likes.”

“Sounds more trouble than he’s worth.” Kurt sat up, jumbled curls falling around his lovely face. Paole would have tugged him down for more cuddles and sex, but both of them had to be going. “You should have a lover. Or a wife.”

“More trouble than they’re worth.”

Kurt laughed. “Maybe.” He bent down and kissed Paole with little of the virginal shyness he’d shown the night before. “I want to see you again.”

“You will. But you’d better be off.”

“Yes. Thank you, Master Paole. I wanted someone special to be my first. You were.”

Paole scoffed, but still smiled. Silver-tongued like his friend, this one was. He lay on his side and watched Kurt pull on his boots, admiring the play of the tight, youthful buttocks under his breeches as he stood.

“Fair travelling, Master Paole.”

“Good harvest, Master Kurt. Until next time.”

Another flash of good teeth and the boy was off. Paole rolled onto his back and stared up at the lightening sky. A lover... More than he dared to hope for. A wife? Hah, not for an ex-slave, and besides, he’d never had a woman. Wouldn’t know where to start.

His eyes rested on the half-empty bread tin. And what had all that been about, then? Gaelin had looked at him with hate in his eyes, and yet minutes before, had been so pleased at the new clothes.

He didn't know how to deal with this, except to punish him, and that didn't work all that well with a boy who wasn't really a slave and was a lot smarter and better educated than Paole. He could ask him but didn't know if he'd receive an answer he could use.

He sighed and stood. He shook out the blankets and rolled them, then broke off some of the bread to eat as he walked down to the stream, still naked except for his boots. The stream was cold but bearable, and over the years, Paole had endured many cold baths. He splashed himself clean and promised himself a proper wash in a bath-house when they reached Haente.

Shaking himself dry, he pulled on his trousers, needing a clean shirt before he called on patients today. Gaelin was up, but hadn't remade the fire. His mouth tightened unhappily as Paole approached, and he looked away.

Paole came right up to the lad, so there could be no pretence of ignoring him. "Sleep well?"

"Yes, master."

"Something wrong?"

"No, master."

"Thought you'd be wearing the new clothes. Those are getting a bit grubby."

"Yes, master."

Paole wanted to shake the brat. "Don't like your tone, boy."

"No, master." The tone was unchanged. He still hadn't looked at Paole.

"Are you looking to be punished, Gaelin?"

The boy's head swivelled towards him. "Whatever you want, *master*."

Paole clenched his fists. He should deal with this, but he had things to do. "Repair your manners, boy, by the time I get back, or life'll become a lot more unpleasant."

"Yes, master."

Paole growled in anger and stomped off. What the *hell* was wrong with the boy? Maybe it was his noble, Tueler blood coming out. Paole *was* only an ex-slave after all. But he was an ex-slave with the key to Gaelin's chain so the boy had better mend his attitude.

Then he remembered other boys with bad attitudes and masters who'd tried to beat humility into them. Beat it into Paole when Paole had only ever tried to do what his master wanted, even when the master contradicted himself. He didn't *want* to beat anything into anyone, even a bad-tempered Tueler lordling.

The little shit was trying to force him into doing something he didn't want to. Well, he wouldn't. Paole had his morals and his standards and even if he'd ended up owning a damn slave against all his own principles and desires, he wouldn't become what he'd always hated.

Ignoring a master's anger had always enraged them more. He'd see if this Yveni reacted the same way. Paole had survived twenty-four years of slavery. A bit of temper from a privileged child was nothing.

Yveni had braced himself for Paole's return, fully expecting to be punished, even beaten for not adopting a submissive manner. But Paole made no comment at all—not on the fact Yveni hadn't changed his smelly clothes or done any of the chores except the cooking, nor on Yveni's deliberately rude responses. The man simply ate his meal, cleaned up his own dishes, and sat down to do the drug measurements Yveni hadn't started, all without saying a word. Clearly his behaviour with Kurt caused him no shame, but that didn't surprise Yveni. It did surprise him that he'd taken no action over the wilfulness.

Still, it suited him to have no interaction with the bastard. All his energies would now be turned to escaping, though that might take more time than he hoped, since the chain had proved utterly resistant to his attacks with knife and axe, and the stout locks unbreakable. He had no skill in lock picking—wouldn't know where to begin. Chopping the tree down to which he'd been tethered might be possible, but could yield unpredictable results.

The best hope would be that Paole would tire of his insolence and be rid of him. In the meantime Yveni would keep his eyes open for any opportunities to slip the leash.

Paole's sole recognition of his change of heart was to shorten the chain and leave him with only food and water while he went to town. No books or tasks. It meant Yveni had nothing to do all day but brood, but it wouldn't kill him. If Paole wanted to keep paying for food for a slave who did nothing, that was his problem.

The silence between them stretched all the way until the next town on Paole's route. This time two young men came, separately, in the evenings to pay their families' debts. Yveni couldn't even eat those nights, he was so sick at what was happening. And what of the families too, so desperate that they would whore their sons out in this way? How long had this revolting business been going on?

As he lay in the tent on his own, the cries of a raped boy came over the night air to him. He put his hands over his ears, not wanting to be party to the crime. If he ever became duc, he'd make it his business to ensure no family was reduced to this to pay for medical care, even that provided by a bastard like Paole.

After that town, the route headed into less populated country. It was more than a week before Paole stopped again, and only to spend a day in the little village before moving on. The nobles and their large estates dominated Karvis, and as far as Yveni could see, this area was favourite for hunting lodges and summer castles, where the cool winds swept away the muggy heat that collected in the valleys, blowing through dense forests and high passes. At night, a hint of snow hung in the air, though they had not, so far as he could calculate, even reached high summer yet.

Were it not for his imprisonment and his odious captor—and the fact he was exiled from his beloved home—he'd have enjoyed this chance to see a land he'd only read about. He'd had little to do with the Karvi before and had seen very few of their kind since he'd been brought unwillingly to the country. The peasants he'd seen hadn't looked so well dressed as those around his father's castle, and there were far fewer signs of technological advances, but this part of the country was far from the capital and the bulk of the population. Perhaps it was different in the south.

They passed through a town set near a large walled castle high up on a cliff. Here the townsfolk were all neatly dressed, and the fronts of buildings all tidily painted. Street cleaners kept the market unusually clean and the gutters empty, and the town even had electric street lighting. Clearly a prosperous town that valued healthy living, but Paole only stopped two hours and that only to buy supplies. Yveni burned with curiosity to know why this place wasn't suitable to ply his trade, but he'd die rather than ask. On the far side of the town, down in a valley, nestled farms. There, Paole stopped at several farmhouses, staying an hour or so in each. Yveni remained chained to the wagon, with only enough play in the chain to climb down and piss against the wheels if he needed to relieve himself. It was more tiresome than being tethered to a tree in camp, but he refused to complain. Yveni would *never* give Paole the satisfaction.

The open landscape of the farms gave way to forest, at first sparse and clearly exploited for timber, to denser, wilder woods. Darker too, enough that Paole lit the wagon's lamps—something he rarely did as they'd almost always reached a campsite long before dark. It was hours before sunset, but nearly dark as midnight. Yveni was used to deep forests, but it was one thing to be in one with an experienced huntmaster and twenty soldiers a mere ten kilometres from the castle, and entirely another to be alone with a hostile foreigner, when he had no idea where they were or if any of the isolated farmhouses would offer help if needed. He shivered and tried not to think about bandits.

The lamps lit the road well enough, though he really hoped Paole was near to where he wanted to be. Yveni peered into the darkness beyond, hoping to see fires or lights, any sign they were reaching a settled area again. But then he saw...

"Stop! Paole, stop, I saw someone." The bundle had been well off the road, and it had taken Yveni precious time to resolve the image and to realise that it wasn't just discarded clothes, but someone wearing them.

Paole reined Peni in. "Where? I saw nothing."

"On the left, a woman...damn it, take this chain off...she was lying on the side of the road, back there!"

"Stay."

Yveni gritted his teeth in frustration as Paole climbed slowly down and walked back along the road. "Do you see her? Is she all right?" He tugged futilely at the chain, then remembered he could get down to the road level.

Paole had taken the small lamp from the hook on the back of the wagon with him. All Yveni could see was the pool of light as he crouched at the side of the road about forty metres back. “Who is it?”

Paole ignored him. Yveni strained but saw nothing but the man’s vague shape and the bright light.

But then Paole stood and walked back, stopping a good ten metres short. “Yveni, catch.”

It wasn’t easy to see, but the sound was unmistakeable as the keys hit the ground near his feet. “Undo your chain, and go.”

Yveni squinted at him in confusion. “Go? Go where? And who is it?”

“A woman and child. Very ill. Take what you want from the wagon and go. There’s a farm three kilometres from here, a town another six further on. You can walk it easily before night. But whatever you do, don’t come near me. No, I said, don’t!”

The raw panic in Paole’s voice shocked Yveni. “Why?”

“It’s kirten fever. I’m already contaminated. Save yourself, and go. Go, I said!” He bellowed so furiously that Yveni took an instinctive step back. “Unlock your chains. Do it, boy. I need to tend to her.”

Yveni obeyed, and Paole, satisfied, turned and went back to the woman.

Yveni piled the chains in the back of the wagon. He should do as Paole ordered. After all, this was the chance he’d hoped for. More than he’d hoped for, because he could take Paole’s money and food and equipment, even the wagon and horse. Leave Paole to his well-deserved fate.

No, he couldn’t.

He sighed and started down the road towards Paole and the woman. He was but five metres from them when Paole realised he was standing there. “I said, leave, boy! Are you insane?” He held the woman in his arms, and in *her* arms lay a tiny bundle. The baby couldn’t be very old. The woman’s clothes were ragged and dirty.

“I’m immune. I was inoculated against kirten fever when I was five. My father instituted a programme in the duchy. I won’t catch it.”

Paole blinked a few times, nonplussed, then he laughed dryly. “Should have sent you back to her, shouldn’t I? But I said for you to go.”

“I will when she’s...when you’re finished here.”

Over sixty percent of those who caught kirten fever, died from it. Outbreaks were unknown in Sardelsa now, and rare in the whole of Tuelwetin, but still deadly when they occurred. The chances of this woman surviving were slim. The child...none at all.

“Do what you will but I have to...” Paole gathered her up and lifted her and the baby in his strong arms. She didn’t move. Yveni picked up the lamp, and the light revealed final-stage blistering covering her face. She had no hope of surviving. Paole had contaminated himself for nothing.

He made no attempt to mount the wagon. Instead he asked Yveni, “Can you drive? There’s a place about three hundred metres down the road. The trees open out, and there’s water.”

“And you?”

“I’ll walk beside. Keep Peni slow so I can use the lamps.”

The journey took only ten minutes, but Yveni concentrated hard to keep Peni at walking pace and the light on the road even. He found the spot Paole meant easily enough, because the sun coming through the break in the tree canopy was startling after the darkness of the deeper woods. Paole walked ahead at that point, wanting to lay the woman and baby down.

Yveni set the brake and jumped down to run to Paole’s side. “What do you need? Blankets?”

“Aye, and a fire. Water too, for drinking.”

He still held the woman, now muttering almost inaudibly. The baby hadn’t moved or cried. Paole caressed the woman’s cheek and soothed her. She was only a girl, really. Younger than Raina. Paole moved the scarf covering her hair. Blond—Uemirien. Another slave?

“Yveni, please?”

He came back to himself. “Hold on.”

He brought the blankets and wrapped it around the girl’s body. He looked at the baby and then up at Paole, who shook his head. “Should I take...?”

Paole shook his head again. “Later,” he mouthed, then looked down at the girl. The mixture of bleakness and tenderness in his expression did something to Yveni’s insides. How could he be so gentle and yet so...

Time for that later. They still had a little firewood in hand, so he could make a campfire. He gave Paole the canteen and went off to find more wood.

There was nothing either of them could do for her. She could take some sips of water from time to time, but no food. As the sun set, she no longer wanted to drink, and was barely conscious for more than a few seconds. Paole offered no treatment because there was none. An infirmary would most likely do the same, only the doctors and nurses could have taken precautions to prevent being contaminated. Too late for that. Too late for Paole. Yet he hadn’t hesitated, even though it was a hopeless case.

She died some time during the night. Yveni didn’t know when exactly because he dozed off, wrapped in blankets and lying near the fire. He woke at dawn because his unconscious mind realised the fire had died down, but as he sat up, prepared to build it up, he found Paole gone and the woman lying on the ground, her face covered with her scarf, her arms folded over the body of her child on her breast.

“Paole?”

“Here, boy.” The man emerged from the trees. Perhaps he’d only gone to relieve himself. “It’s over.”

“Do you need to alert someone? Like a sheriff?”

“Probably, but taking a kirtan fever death into a town won’t do me any favours and she’ll be no less dead for it. I’ll report it and her slave mark. Right now, I need to dig a grave.”

“I’ll help.”

Paole shot him a startled and slightly suspicious look. “Why don’t you leave? You said you would when it was over.”

“Not until she’s decently buried.”

Paole grunted. “Only got the one shovel, boy.”

“Then I’ll dig because you sat up all night.”

“What’s this to you? She’s only a Uemirien slave.”

Yveni ignored the jab and fetched the shovel from the back of the wagon. “Where do you want it?”

“Away from the water supply. Over there.” He gestured vaguely towards the edge of the clearing. He suddenly looked very tired, fine lines around eyes and mouth deepening, his normal erect stance slumped and defeated. Yveni found himself feeling sorry for him, and stopped.

Digging a grave in packed earth wasn’t as easy as doing it on a sandy beach, but Yveni was determined to do this for the woman, even if he hadn’t been able to do anything else.

Paole sat by the woman’s side, ignoring Yveni and his excavation. What was he thinking? About the woman and the baby? Or about what he had been exposed to and what that would mean? End-stage kirten fever was highly contagious. If Yveni left, and Paole took ill...

But there was a town a little way down the road. If Yveni saw him that far, and they had a healer, then there would be no more he could do for him. Honour would be served.

It took him two hours to dig the hole deep and long enough to take the slight bodies of mother and child. When he finished, he climbed out and called to Paole, who lifted the girl and carefully bore her body over. Yveni helped him lay her and the baby out in the grave. “Do you know her name?”

“No. Doesn’t matter now.”

The harshness of Paole’s words stung him. “She was still a person, even if she was a slave.”

“You’re telling me that, boy? Get out and leave me deal with the rest of it. Go clean up.”

“I want to—”

“What?” Paole scowled at him. “What’s there to be done?”

“Say a prayer.”

“There are no gods, no spirits. Don’t waste my time. Go away.”

“No. Do what you will, and so will I. You set me free, and you won’t chain me or order me around again.”

Paole didn’t look at him, didn’t reply as he pulled himself out of the grave and began to shovel dirt quickly, angrily over the two corpses. To himself, Yveni recited the prayers for the departed he’d said over Gerd’s grave, and over his father’s. And when he was done, he said, out loud, a prayer in Uemi, not a prayer for the dead, but a prayer of hope and blessing for a new mother, because the girl deserved that much.

When he finished praying, he lifted his gaze and found Paole kneeling by the half-filled grave, his expression empty, his eyes red. “Are you all right?”

Paole stood and wiped his face on his sleeve. He didn’t answer Yveni as he began shovelling dirt again.

Yveni waited until he finished before he asked, “Should we put a marker on it?”

“I’ll deal with that. Time for you to leave.”

“I can’t. You’re almost certain to fall ill. I’ll make sure you get to the town you mentioned—”

“Not going to the town, boy. You think I want to spread this? If they find I’m infectious, they’ll throw me out on the road, same as her.”

“Is that what happened?”

“Her owner threw her out, most likely. Happens often enough. Probably belonged to that big castle back that way. They don’t want to waste a healer’s fee on a dying slave, don’t want it to spread, so they drop them out in the middle of nowhere and then say the slave ran away.”

“That’s vile!”

“You sound surprised, boy.” Paole rested heavily on the shovel, like he could barely stand up without its help. “Anyway, you don’t need to help me. You can take the wagon and Peni. Don’t want her caught out here with me. Just leave me a bedroll, supplies.”

“Are you just going to stay here and die?”

“I’m going to die anyway. The only choice I have is in how many people I take with me.”

Yveni clenched his fists in frustration. “But...it’s not certain you’ll get sick and it’s not certain you’ll die if you do.”

“None of your business, boy. You wanted to be free, so go. You’re nothing to me any more. You don’t like me and I don’t like you.”

“I don’t like you because you force young boys to sleep with you!”

“I what?”

Paole was clearly exhausted. Yveni doubted he had the energy to put on an act, and his confusion looked real. “Those boys. Kurt and the others. Were paying you in sex for their families’ debt.”

“Are you out of your mind? Their families paid me in bread, food, those clothes I got which you never wear.”

“But...” Yveni ran over the conversation with Kurt. “He didn’t mention any of that.”

“Did you ask him flat if he was sleeping with me out of obligation?”

“No.”

Paole shook his head and walked towards the wagon. “Thought you were so smart,” he muttered as he passed Yveni.

“Wait!”

“Boy, I want to wash and to eat. I told you twice now to leave.”

“No, I won’t. I’m going to stay and look after you.”

Paole made a derisive noise and didn’t stop. Yveni had to chase after him. “Are you so eager to die alone?”

“What makes you think I want *your* company? You’ve been a little shit for weeks, and over nothing at all, it turns out.”

“I *thought* you were exploiting children!”

Paole turned and glared. “None of those boys were children. How can you believe I’d do something like that? Shows what you think of me, doesn’t it.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I don’t care. Go away, Yveni. Go away and find your fancy friends and be a lord or a king or whatever you want. Take what you need. The only thing I want is for Peni to be cared for. If you won’t do that, I’ll set her free in the forest, but I don’t like her chances of surviving in there.” As if she’d understood, the big horse whinnied softly. Paole went to her and rubbed his cheek against her jaw, scratching underneath it the way she liked.

Yveni gritted his teeth. He’d been a damn fool. He could have just asked a simple question and all this misunderstanding would have been avoided, but no. He’d leapt to a conclusion and sat solidly astride it, as his father would have said.

Well, he wouldn’t make another mistake. He marched up to Paole. “I’m not leaving. I’m going to wait with you and see if the fever comes. If it does, I’ll nurse you. If it kills you, I’ll bury you, and if it doesn’t, you can take me with you until you reach a port. I’ll work with you until then.”

The man laughed harshly, unpleasantly. “Sorry, no. I’ve seen how your promises end up, boy. Made any gloves lately?”

“Given me the tools to do the job lately, *master*? I was at fault, but so were you.”

“At least I wasn’t accusing you of whoring out little boys.”

“Look, it was an honest mistake. If you’d thought me guilty of that, you’d have been angry too. And you’ve accused me of plenty of things that aren’t true. Being a thief, wanting to poison your patients. Lying to you, which I haven’t.”

Paole straightened up. “Tell me who you are.”

Yveni took a deep breath. The risk was great, but Paole already knew enough to bring the Karvins down on him, and hadn’t. “I’m the Vicont Yveni, the missing heir to the ducal throne of Sardelsa. The man who’s plotting my death is the regent, the Margrave Konsatin. He’s betrothed to my sister. Gil was my father’s huntmaster and best friend. Everything else I’ve told you is the complete truth.”

Paole regarded him with bleary eyes. He didn't even blink in surprise, which was a little insulting after the bastard had demanded this information over and over these past few weeks. "Konsatin has Karvi friends?"

"Yes. Long ties between his brother, the grand duc of Enholt, and here. I really need to leave Karvis."

"Then go."

"After."

Paole buried his face in Peni's neck briefly, then looked up. "As you wish, boy. I'm too tired to fight you."

"Then go and rest. Is there anything in your books about kirten fever?"

"Think so. I..."

His voice drifted away. Yveni walked up and took his arm. "Rest. I'll make something to eat for when you wake. You can get through this, Paole."

Paole gave him a long, searching look, then let Yveni tug him over by the embers of the campfire, and to Yveni's discarded blankets. "You really ought to go," he mumbled as he curled up by the fire's remains.

"Later. Sleep now."

The man muttered something incoherent and rolled over. He was asleep before Yveni had straightened up.

There was much to do while Paole rested, since they hadn't made any effort to set up the camp. Poor Peni was still in harness, but she was such a placid old thing she hadn't complained at all. He unhitched her and gave her feed and a long lead to allow her to graze. He ate some stale bread while he collected water and dug a latrine. Kirten fever lasted four to five days, if the patient survived so long, so they'd be here a week or so. He'd paid no attention to the supplies in his weeks of sulking. Now he had to be responsible about such matters.

By the time Paole woke three hours later, Yveni had cooled boiled water for him to drink, herbed flat bread made, and a rabbit ready to be spit-roasted. He'd also bathed and changed into the clothes Paole had bought for him, and the tent was up.

Paole looked around the campsite and scratched his head. "Been busy, haven't you?"

"Someone had to be. I'll make tea."

"Wait. I'm filthy. Let me wash."

"I'll bring fresh clothes."

"Being friendly all of a sudden, aren't you?"

Yveni flushed. "I wronged you, badly. I want to make amends."

"Whatever you like. It won't matter in a week's time."

Yveni didn't chide him for his attitude. He would simply prove him wrong.

He'd only intended to bring the man his clothes, then leave, but by the time he reached the stream, Paole was naked, sluicing sweat and grave dirt off his body, his long thick plait unbound. Yveni stared at his back. The man was well made, he'd guessed that, and the muscles in shoulders and thighs were truly impressive. But the scarring...

"Staring at something, Yveni?"

"You were whipped?"

"Did you bring soap?"

Yveni started, and then remembered he had. He tossed it over to Paole, who immediately sat down in the water and dunked his head. Ignoring Yveni, he began to wash his blond hair methodically from the scalp down, using careful measured strokes as if it was a familiar ritual.

"Wh-who beat you?"

"Masters, who else?"

"When you were a child?"

Paole didn't answer. Yveni knew what he would have said. "Gods, Tilin—"

"Don't think about it. Naught you can do, not now. Become a duc and do it then."

"You believe my story then?"

Paole paused, then shrugged. "Maybe you're lying, maybe you're not. I guess I don't really care any more."

"I can prove it."

"I just said I don't care. Leave me in peace, Yveni. I've things to think about and you're distracting me."

Despite the irritated words, Paole's manner was more sad than angry. Yveni left him to it and made tea.

Paole ate the offered food in silence. "What do you know about kirten fever?" Yveni asked as Paole sipped his tea.

"No cure, almost always fatal."

"Not almost always. Not in fit young men. You have a real chance."

"Never heard of anyone beating it, boy."

"I have. The treatment is to relieve the symptoms?"

"Aye. Reduce fever, ease pain, keep fluids up. But it never works. That's why the master never tried with her." He jerked his head towards the girl's grave.

"The baby was newborn, and she was only very young. They might not have saved her, but you've got a much better chance."

"Maybe. I have papers to write out. My will, your manumission. Want to make sure no one gives you any trouble over the wagon and Peni."

“Will you stop talking like that?” Yveni wanted to shake him, not that he would make much of an impression.

“Face facts, Yveni. The fever takes hold in two days. I’ve only that long to arrange matters. Once I’m dead, you have to prove you’re free and you own what I leave you. People know that wagon. They’ll ask where I am.”

“You do what you like, but *I’m* going to concentrate on making sure you survive.”

Paole sipped his tea and didn’t react.

“Does your gift work on yourself?”

“No. I’m going by what I’ve seen. You’d be better off leaving now, boy. I don’t know why you’re bothering with me.”

“I don’t know why you bothered with her, since you knew she was dying.”

“Didn’t want her to die alone,” he mumbled. “Was only decent.”

“I guess you’re the only one with decency around here. The rest of us are just scum. I’d have walked right past that girl and left her to die on her own. You know what we Tuelers are like.”

“Some of you *are* like that.”

“And I can tell you about a Uemirien or two I wouldn’t trust my sisters with as well,” Yveni snapped. “I’m staying, so stop wasting your breath. If you want to do these papers, I’ll help you. Then we need to prepare for you to be sick. We’re short of supplies. I’ll have to go to that town to buy some.”

“Maybe I don’t want some clumsy Tueler nursing me. Ever done anything of the kind?”

“Yes, I have. My father had a stroke and for the last six months of his life, I was the one who bathed him and fed him and tried to help him learn to speak again. I—”

Yveni’s throat closed. He’d tried not to think of his father all this time, because it hurt so.

Paole reached out a big hand and patted him. “If you really insist, you can help.”

“Thank you.” He grinned, though his eyes were wet. “Now put all your energy into fighting the fever and not me.”

“I’ll do my best, boy.”

Paole couldn’t go into town with Yveni, and he felt it would cause less of a problem if no mention was made of the dead slave. “It’s not like anyone would have reported her missing or be looking for her,” he’d commented bitterly.

Yveni would pass himself off as Karvi, and as Paole’s apprentice if anyone was curious, but Paole thought they wouldn’t be. Since Paole had all the medicinals he needed, and the supplies were mundane, no one would be interested in a random youth, not in a market town.

So it proved to be, and no one paid him any attentions or remarked on his fake Karvi accent. He returned by early afternoon. Paole had not only written out a short, straightforward will and the

manumission papers, but had dug out three books and was busy making notes. “How do you feel?” Yveni asked.

Paole looked up. “Like that question will drive me mad if you keep asking it. You’ll know when I’m sick, boy. Put that all away and let me show you this.”

In his neat hand, Paole had listed the stages of kirten fever, the treatment and the danger signs. “If you can keep the fever down, that might help. But you can do nothing for the internal damage. I either survive that or I don’t. Once the blistering starts, that’s it.”

“Internal...you mean, even if you live, you’ll be sick?”

“Why do you think they don’t bother treating slaves with it?”

“But...will you ever get better?”

“In time. But not your problem because you said you’d leave after, and I’ll hold you to that.”

“All right.” But Yveni had no intention of being bound to a promise that heartless.

Chapter Seventeen

The boy's sudden altruism was a distraction of sorts from thinking about his fate, but Paole was realistic enough to know that was all it was, and not salvation. He prepared the antipyretics, the pain relievers, the cloths, soothing teas and the instructions more for Yveni's sake than his own. None of it would do any good but it would help Yveni believe he'd done his best, and when Paole finally died, perhaps that would ease his conscience.

Why did he bother? Habit, mostly, he told himself as Yveni carefully wrote down the explanations of what to do and when with the drugs. Mathias had made him a healer and he would be a healer to the last, even if it was only of the boy's feelings. Left to himself, he'd have prepared a poison draft and swallowed it as soon the fever took hold. He thought seriously about preparing one anyway. He could tell the boy it was another pain reliever and Yveni would never know...

But that wasn't *fair* and if Paole was to die soon, he wanted to die being as fair as he could, even if he'd had precious little fairness in his life. If Yveni wanted to fight this battle, then let him have a chance to win.

"Paole? Tell me about your masters?"

His fist closed involuntarily over the list of drugs, crumpling them. Yveni eased it from his hand and straightened it out. "Why?"

Yveni looked up at from under his lashes. "I just wanted to know...how you learned to read and write. Who taught you about healing. Who whipped you."

"Not my idea of light conversation, boy."

"You have no happy memories?"

Luis and Ishma. Puppies in the barn. Being bought by Mathias and realising that finally he had a master who'd never hit him, and wanted to treat him well. Not many in twenty-eight years of life. "Not enough to tell you about. I learned to read and write with my first owner, because he wanted to sell me when I reached puberty, and a literate slave is worth more. He sold me to a herbalist, who sold me to another, who left me to his son, who sold me to my last master, who died after freeing me."

"But why would he sell you when you reached puberty?"

This boy had been raised so innocent. Paole looked him in the eye. "Because he liked little boys without body hair."

Yveni didn't get it at first. Paole looked down at the notes, hoping maybe he wouldn't. But then he heard the gasp. "You? Were you...?"

"Raped? Yes. And the other boys. Illegal, even here, but no one would believe a slave, and no one was likely to catch him."

Yveni covered his mouth. "Tilin?" he whispered. "Oh gods."

"Look, boy, the child most likely went to a family who wanted to buy a child cheap and rear him to work in their business or their kitchens. Not the best life, but not the worst. Some owners are kind, like my last, and will free a slave once he's done good service."

"But not all are kind."

"No. It's not a kind trade. You know that already."

"Paole—"

"I don't want to talk of it, either. We're done here and I'm hungry. Think you could make me some of those pretty cakes of yours, now you know I'm not an evil violator of children?"

Yveni flushed, which amused Paole no end. All he deserved, the little shit. Why hadn't he just *asked*?

He was tired as well as hungry, and with nothing left to do, he decided he could stretch out and watch Yveni work with fat and flour and honey to create one of his tasty treats. "You know," he reflected, "the only thing I could think was wrong, was that you objected to me sleeping with other men."

"No! I mean...that wasn't the problem." The boy's flush got deeper and he became quite fascinated by rubbing suet into the flour. Paole could understand that. Yveni's fingers were rather well shaped. Watching them could be quite pleasurable.

"They come to me, you know. I never ask. Not sure why."

"Because you're—" Yveni's mouth snapped shut.

"I'm...?"

"Handsome."

Paole lifted an eyebrow. "I'm scarred and foreign and blind in one eye."

"You are? Which eye?"

Paole pointed to the left. "Third master. Beat me into unconsciousness, gave me this scar on my forehead. The sight was gone when I came to. I can see a tiny sliver of what I used to on that side, and that's all."

"That's why you missed the girl on that side of the road."

"Most likely."

Yveni nodded and continued to knead the mixture in the bowl. In other circumstances, Paole would watch carefully to learn the task, but now he felt there was little point. For the first time in his life, he had no obligation to do anything, and if this was the last chance for a rest, he'd take it.

"Handsome, huh?" he said once Yveni had set the bowl under a cloth to prove.

Again Yveni flushed. He could have been such good company.

“Yes.” The boy wouldn’t meet his eye. “Compared to many I’ve seen.”

“Many Uemiriens?”

“Uh...yes. And Tuelers.” He folded his arms and glared. “You know this already, you bastard.”

“No, not really. I thought they were attracted by the fact I was passing through. No consequences.”

“Maybe. I don’t know. Why don’t you ask them?”

Too late now, he thought, but didn’t say. “Not important. I enjoy it and so do they. Have you ever...?”

“No!” Yveni stood and stalked off to the stream, probably to wash his hands, certainly to avoid answering embarrassing questions. Served the brat right, poking his nose where it wasn’t wanted.

Paole grinned. Not dead yet. He could still have a little fun with this one.

The cakes were good. Yveni kept shooting Paole suspicious looks as if he feared the man would ask him something else about his virginity. Paole had no real interest in the subject, but Yveni’s squirming was funny. What age did they wed in Tueler? His sister had been betrothed—fourteen, he’d said. Strange the boy was not.

Ah, it didn’t matter now. None of it did. He only wanted to lie by the fire and rest, and not think of death for a bit.

Yveni wouldn’t sit still, and while Paole watched the rabbit roasting, the boy went into the wagon, searching again for who knew what. A few days ago, it would have infuriated Paole. Now, he didn’t care. The wagon was Yveni’s now. Paole regretted Peni most of all. She’d have to be sold, and she was an old girl, not likely to be treated well.

Mathias’s cabin was another, lesser regret. All his books, his lovingly carved furniture. The essence of a decent man, and his grave. No one who would appreciate it as a gift, and Yveni had a destiny elsewhere. Ah well. He’d left one life when he’d been captured at four years old. He was simply leaving another now. There had been many times he’d thought he’d be killed at the hands of a master, or a servant abusing their position to take out petty anger on a helpless slave. This way, it had been his choice. There were worse things. Dying alone was one.

Yveni emerged from the wagon. “What about this book?”

Paole didn’t recognise the fat volume with a green leather cover. “What about it? There are a lot of books in there, boy. Don’t use most of them. I only brought them with me because I was planning to sell them in Kivnic, but you interrupted me.”

Yveni pulled a face. “Haven’t we been over that enough, *master*? It’s in Uemi.”

“Which is why I don’t use it.”

“Yes, but it’s a book about illnesses and cures. Maybe there’s something in here about kirten fever.”

“If the Uemiriens had a cure, wouldn’t your friends in Sardelsa know of it?”

“Maybe, but they wouldn’t have talked of it because kirten fever doesn’t occur there any more. I only know about it because I studied my father’s health programmes.”

Paole grunted and poured himself more tea. “What does it say?”

“Hold on.” He peered at the text using the light of the oil lamp. Paole regretted he’d never learned to read his native language. The book Yveni held was an old one, and possibly Mathias had never read it either.

“The author says that he’s observed more people surviving kirten fever if the fever is allowed to run and not suppressed too much. He thinks it’s because it burns the infection out of the body.”

“Heard that idea before, boy.”

Yveni looked up. “Never tried it?”

“I’ve never treated kirten fever. I’ve just talked to those who have.”

“So what if he’s right?”

“What if he’s wrong and you kill me faster?”

“Does the fever kill? Or is it just a symptom?”

Paole furrowed his brow in concentration. He’d never thought about it like that. “Don’t know. Too high a fever kills, I know that for sure. Seen it myself.”

“But what if it’s not *too* high? Is it dangerous then?”

“Just unpleasant. Don’t see the point of making someone who’s dying suffer more, though.”

“Do you have a thermometer?”

“Somewhere. Never use the thing. Yveni, this is pointless—”

The boy glared at him across the fire. “No, it’s not. If you’re willing to try and to put up with the discomfort, what have we to lose?”

“What if you can’t control the fever and it shoots up?”

“I won’t let it. Please, Paole? I want to try. I want you to live.”

Paole shook his head. Certainly a waste of time, but what harm would it do? “As you wish. Do you know how to use one?”

“Yes, Doctor Kardwil showed me. At the castle infirmary.”

“You were a nosy little brat, weren’t you?”

“My father put a lot of stock in a well-rounded education.” Yveni grinned. “And besides, it kept me out of mischief, he said.”

“Wise man.”

“Yes.” Yveni’s smile slipped a little. “Now tell me where to find the thermometer.”

He woke with a headache, which might have been because he was tired, but it wasn’t, not with the slight aura in his vision too. Should he tell the boy?

No, they'd prepared as well as they could. He didn't want to spend the day—possibly his last well day alive—with Yveni watching him anxiously. More anxiously.

So he wrapped a blanket around his shoulders and went to poke the fire, before surreptitiously dosing himself with a pain reliever for the headache. He filled a bucket with horse feed and went over to say good morning to Peni. He'd miss her. She'd been no youngster when Mathias bought him. She had to be nearly twenty now. "Still beautiful, aren't you, sweetness?" He scratched under her chin and she pushed at him with her muzzle, soft brown eyes all knowing and forgiving. Now Mathias was dead, she was the oldest friend he had.

"Paole? Are you all right?"

"Waiting for the water to boil, that's all."

He didn't look at the boy. He had soft brown eyes too, but often they were filled with judgement and anger. Yveni was born to be a master, not a slave. Fate had thrown them together, but they couldn't be friends. Peni was a friend. Owned, ordered around, treated like a possession, just as he had been. Paole decided that he'd never let her be sold. He'd make Yveni promise to have her put down decently by a proper knacker. They were quick, the good ones. "Sorry, sweetness," he whispered into her big ear. "I'd like to care for you for the rest of my life, but I won't be able to."

Yveni had gone. Paole went off to relieve himself and pull himself together. It'd be a long day.

Paole was hiding something from him, and Yveni knew what it was. If the man wanted to pretend he was well, then...let him. There was little to be done but wait.

Paole's appetite was right off. He nibbled one of the sweet cakes, but all he really wanted was tea with honey in it. Yveni supplied him and didn't comment on him not eating. So long as he kept his fluids up, that was all he needed, for now.

Paole wandered off by himself for a bit, went to talk to Peni and to stretch his legs. Yveni cleared up and went over to the forlorn little grave at the edge of the clearing. He didn't want to imagine a second grave beside it, but he couldn't help himself.

"She needs a marker, her and the baby."

Yveni started at Paole's quiet words. The man moved so quietly, for all his size. "I'll see to it. What should it be?"

"I don't know. Unknown Uemirien mother and child, and the date. Maybe just carve a flower on it, or a bird. What does it matter, in the end?"

"Not much. But I can do that. How's your headache?"

Paole sighed and shot him a sideways glance. "Too damn sharp, you are. It's bearable for now. I don't want to talk about it. I promise to let you know when it worsens."

Yveni nodded. "What would you like me to do?"

“How about you show me how to write in Uemi?”

“Now?”

“Why not?”

Yveni could think of more pleasant things to do with a headache, but it was Paole’s choice.

He picked up the characters for his name quickly enough, and for Yveni’s, but after that, lost the ability to concentrate sufficiently, which irritated him. Yveni distracted him by talking about the castle and his upbringing, about Gil and Sofia, his sisters, and just about anything he cared to ramble on about. He even told Hilario’s silly story about the fish, which raised a tiny smile in his companion. Paole lay back on the grass with his eyes closed, listening to Yveni talk, the sun beating on his face, apparently contented, despite the headache. How many times in his life had he felt happy? How could a life with beatings bad enough to scar have any happiness at all?

Paole dozed off in the sun. Yveni let him be, making sure there was water and tea available. If Paole’s notes were accurate, he’d be really sick before sunset. If he was lucky, he would be done in under five days. Fifth fever or blisters. Life or death. And they wouldn’t know until the fourth fever passed.

“Need a favour.”

Yveni looked up from the book he was reading. Paole still had his eyes closed. “What?”

“If...you end up with Peni. Before you go to Horches. I need you to have her...put down. Killed quick and neat. Don’t sell her. She’s too old, and she’ll be worked to death. Promise.”

Tears pricked Yveni’s eyes. “Yes, I promise.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re not going to die.”

“Everyone dies, boy. It’s not so bad. Seen a lot worse than what’s ahead for me.”

Yveni wiped his face. “Can I ask something? What’s it like when you feel...someone’s dying?”

“Not feel. See. They fade. Become grey. The less colour, the paler, the closer they are to death.”

“Sounds horrible.”

“Can be.”

“Do you tell them? When you see it?”

“Mostly no. I tell their usual healer, let them handle it. If there’s no choice, if they live alone or they ask me flat, then I do. Never lie. Everyone deserves a chance to make themselves ready.”

The distant tone in his voice sent shivers up Yveni’s spine. It sounded like *Paole* was fading. “A lot of responsibility.”

“Every healer has it. I wish I knew more about the craft, trained properly. But no slave is ever trained at a university.”

“No woman either. At least, not in the rural clans. I told Raina to come to the duchy and train there.”

A spark of interest crept into Paole’s voice. “Think she will?”

“No. She probably thinks I’m dead. You could train with us instead.”

“If I live. How many years until you’re duc?”

“Too many.” Konsatin had slipped out of his mind of late. “Three years and one month until I’m twenty-one. I just have to make sure no one kills me before I get back to the castle, overthrow him and all his supporters, and convince people that I’m the rightful heir. Easy.”

“For you, it will be. You’re a very stubborn person, Yveni.” Paole rubbed his eyes and winced. “I think I want another dose of the dein powder.”

Yveni fetched it and mixed it in some water. He touched Paole’s forehead. “Warm.”

“Lying in the sun, of course it is. I just have a headache.”

But it was more than that, and within the hour, he’d begun to shake and suffer shooting pains in his legs. He moved across to the bedroll Yveni had laid out under the tree on the other side of the fire, stripped to his shirt and loincloth, and tried to rest. Yveni could only watch and wait.

The fever built incredibly fast, and along with it, racking cramps in the limbs. The pain relief in Paole’s armoury had no effect, though the cool cloths did, somewhat. Paole’s body burned so hot that the cloths had to be changed every few seconds. He poured with sweat, drenching the bedroll underneath him. Yveni anxiously monitored the thermometer thrust under Paole’s armpit, hoping he could keep his body below the fatal level. The fever went on for hours, rising and falling with astonishing speed. Yveni did his best to feed Paole cool tea and antipyretics, but the man wasn’t lucid most of the time, and it was a struggle to help him sip anything from a spoon. His muscled body contorted and thrashed and spasmed in the fever dreams, and Paole moaned in imagined cold and pain. He called out to people Yveni didn’t know, begging for help, for mercy, sometimes in a voice which sounded very young, breaking Yveni’s heart because he could so easily imagine a child being beaten and pleading in just this manner.

Paole’s temperature hovered just below the danger level for two hours or more, until nightfall. As suddenly as it had built, the fever dropped. Then the risk was of him becoming too cold in his wet shirt and on the bedroll. He wasn’t too weak to move so Yveni could change the blankets and his shirt, but once he was settled and wrapped warmly, he wanted only to rest, and complained querulously as Yveni made him drink the tea and honey that would keep him alive.

“One down,” Yveni said encouragingly. Paole couldn’t raise a smile.

He slept like a dead man until dawn, when the pain and fever woke him. This bout went on longer, the temperature rising over the danger point briefly before dropping back and tormenting Paole for several more hours. Thus the pattern went for the next two bouts. By the time the fourth one was over, at the end of the third day, Paole could no longer move or sit, and even swallowing sips of liquid was almost beyond him. Yveni coaxed him to take drops of fluid, anything to replace the litres of sweat that had poured out of him, and despaired at the lack of understanding in the bloodshot green eyes, the dehydrated skin and the

quiet whimpers of pain. Paole's anguished thrashing had turned the thick braid into a knotted mess, and his nails had cut the palms of his hands from the clenching of his fists.

Yveni was nearly as exhausted as his patient, taking his rest in short bursts, afraid to miss the start of the next bout and allowing the fever to build too high. Once Paole passed out, he set about cleaning up the latest mess, and only as he hung the blanket out near the fire, did he remember that tonight would be make or break for Paole. Would it be fever or blisters?

He didn't dare sleep, watching Paole's face for the slightest sign of a change. Was that mark on his cheek...no, just a drop of water. Paole twitched and moaned softly, dreaming while his body readied for the final battle.

The hours ticked away. Yveni found it hard to stay awake, no matter how often he pinched himself. But when Paole suddenly grunted, he was right there, checking. His hand on Paole's skin registered the heat, and the thermometer confirmed it. Another fever bout. Was it really the last one?

Maybe it was the last, maybe not, but it was surely the worst and most vicious. Over and over his temperature spiked past the danger level, forcing Yveni pour cans of water over the man's body to reduce it again. The ground around them grew sodden and so did the bedroll, but Yveni never stopped. A breeze that started up at midnight helped, and Yveni raised Paole's shirt to give the air best access to the heated skin.

Then the fever broke in mere minutes, Paole's temperature plummeting. Using the blanket, Yveni dragged him from the worst of the wet ground. No hope of moving him onto a new bedroll, so Yveni dried him with sacking as best he could, packed more under him, and wrapped as many dry blankets around him as possible. He lay down next to him to lend his own body heat. It was damp and uncomfortable and Paole stank unpleasantly of illness.

Yveni fell asleep in seconds.

He woke with a start and blinked at the sun streaming through the leaves of the tree above him. He pushed back the blankets and put his hand over Paole's sweat-damp chest. He felt the faint throb of his heart, saw the chest rise and fall.

"You're alive." Exhausted and completely done over by the stress and the long, long vigil, tears came easily to his eyes. He laid his head on Paole's chest again and wept. "You're alive," he whispered.

He jerked as Paole slowly moved his arm and wrapped it around him. "Don't cry, boy." His voice was weak and harsh, but lucid. "No need to cry."

"I know. I just...you're not going to die."

"Not today. Hush. Rest a while."

So Yveni did, sobbing himself back to sleep. He hadn't been able to save his father, or Gerd, but Paole was alive. He hadn't lost someone else. Everything would be all right now.

Chapter Eighteen

Paole was thirsty and hungry and weak as a newborn puppy, but all things considered, he didn't feel too bad. Yveni's weight on him was a comfort, as was his youthful, healthy heat. Paole moved his hand to pet the unkempt dark hair. He'd worked so hard. Paole felt guilty for ever doubting he would.

His movement woke the boy, who blinked open his eyes and stared at him. "How do you feel?"

"Limp."

Yveni laughed and sat up, rubbing his eyes. "Gods, it's nearly noon. I'm starving."

"Me too, though I think tea and honey is all I can handle."

Yveni's brow furrowed in concern. "You look all right."

"Kirten fever weakens all the organs, especially the liver and kidneys, according to the books. Let's take it easy."

"Sure. But you're going to be well, I feel it."

Paole smiled at the stubborn expression. "You know, when *you* say it, I almost believe it, boy."

"Good."

He allowed Yveni to bustle about because he couldn't stop him even if he wanted to, and because the boy had been right about so much, Paole may as well let him take charge for now.

The boy's vigour amazed him. Despite the lack of sleep, the exertions, and the dark shadows under his eyes, he had the fire built, tea made, and a thin meat broth set to slow cooking in no time at all. Paole couldn't sit up just yet, so Yveni carefully spooned the tea and honey into his mouth. Embarrassing, but the liquid was welcome. He only hoped he could walk before he had to deal with the consequences of drinking it.

"You smell."

"I know. Deal with it later, boy. I could do with a blanket. I'm cold." Yveni covered his mouth as if horrified at not realising it. Paole made a grab for his wrist and held it weakly. "You're doing fine. Slow down. Cover me up, and see if Peni's all right."

"She is. I fed her yesterday. I think she's enjoying her holiday."

With the blanket cutting out the rank odour from his sweat-soiled body and shirt, as well as the cool breeze, Paole was more comfortable and dozed off.

He'd expected nothing more than feeling like shit the first day—actually, he hadn't expected to survive, so he was pleasantly surprised to be feeling anything at all—and Yveni hadn't expected any more

from him either. The next day came more of a shock to his young companion, when Paole had to face things like relieving himself and washing, and it quickly became apparent that he couldn't totter more than a few steps before utterly exhausting himself.

"Warned...you...boy," he panted as he lay back on the bedroll. "Leave me...be."

"Well, no, I can't. How long will it take you to recover?"

"How do I know?"

"It's going to be more than a couple of days, isn't it?"

"Likely." A couple of *years*, possibly. Or never. He couldn't say that to the boy though.

"Then you can't stay here."

"It's none of your business now."

Yveni folded his arms and his expression turned mulish. "Yes, it is. I want a ride to the nearest port. You owe me that much."

"Route doesn't go past one. Can take you to where you can hitch a lift, that's all."

"Fine. But you can't stay here. You need to see a healer, we need supplies."

"Healer'll only tell me it'll take time to mend."

"You don't *know* that, Paole."

He lifted his head as far as he could, which wasn't much. "Leave me be!"

His weak bellow offended the boy, who straightened up. "I'll make more tea," he declared, and stomped off.

Paole sagged back. One minute the boy had to be chained up to stop him running off, the next he was like dunel crap on your boot, impossible to be rid of. All Paole wanted to do was crawl away and hide until he was well again.

Except he wasn't up to crawling, and even hiding took effort. He forced himself up to a sitting position, ignoring the dizziness and nausea. Yveni rushed over to assist, and Paole forced his automatic response back. "Take it easy," his unwanted nurse told him. "Let me make some tea—"

Paole gripped his arm and did his best to pull the boy down to the ground. "Stop," he growled. "Just stop."

Yveni obeyed and sat, giving Paole a puzzled, slightly resentful look.

"What are you planning, boy?"

"To look after you."

"For how long?"

"Long as it takes, of course."

"And what about Horches? What about being duc?"

Yveni looked down. "I've got time."

"You said yourself, you need to get out of Karvis. Longer you stay here, the bigger the risk."

"I know. But you'll die if I leave you now."

"Probably. But you owe me nothing. I owe you a lift, so take some of my gold, walk to the town and buy a horse."

"No. I won't."

"Why not?"

"Because I won't lose another friend."

Paole shook his head. "Yveni, I'm the man who owned you. Not a friend. Don't ever make that mistake."

"I don't *care*!"

The shout hurt Paole's head and he winced. Yveni instantly apologised, but Paole held up his hand. "Stop. You have something I never will. A destiny."

"And you have something *I* don't—a choice. All my damn life I've been following other people's orders. Now when I want to do something of my own volition, you're *still* trying to make me do what I don't want to."

"I don't understand why my health matters a damn."

With his jaw set so hard, the boy looked far older than his years. "It's not you. Not *you* you. It's anyone. I'd have helped that woman, if I could have. I was born to rule. Born to serve. It's my duty to help you."

"Not your subject, boy."

"I know." His shoulders slumped. "Is it wrong of me to want to be sure you're all right before I leave?"

"No...but you need to let go. That's the lesson slaves learn early. Don't grow attached."

"I'm not a slave. Look, I'm not asking for gratitude, or money. As soon as you can go back to your work, I'll be gone."

"And if I can't?"

"Then I'll make other plans."

He could no longer sit up, so Yveni helped him lie back. "Don't have the strength to fight you."

"Then don't. You don't understand. This is my free choice. I want to do this. Don't lie to me and tell me you can manage because by all the gods, you can't."

"Been sicker than this."

"On your own?"

Paole should lie, but he didn't have the strength, and besides the boy was too sharp.

"Thought not." Yveni sounded more irritated than smug. "Tomorrow, I'm taking you to town. Do you have a home anywhere?"

"Dadel, in the Taeln Hills. Long way from here. My master only lived there in the cold months."

“How long would it take to get there, and have you gold enough to survive until next season?”

“Three, four weeks, going slow, and yes.”

“Then I’ll take you there.”

“And then?”

“And then...we’ll see. Paole, you did your best to bully me before and it didn’t work. You have no chance of making me change my mind now.”

“Stubborn little brat.”

“At your lordship’s service.”

Paole sighed and closed his eyes. More trouble than it was worth, fighting this child.

The force of nature that was Yveni, vicont of Sardelsa—or so he claimed to be, and Paole had less and less reason to disbelieve him—swept on. He rearranged the wagon so there was room for Paole to lie in it, he carefully mapped out a route, and the very next morning, after Paole was fed, watered, washed and relieved, they set out for the town, Yveni in charge, and Paole his helpless prisoner in all but name.

The healer in the town wasn’t someone Paole would necessarily trust, but he examined him thoroughly, and said exactly what Paole thought he would—rest and time, and a light diet were all that could be done. Expressing amazement for the third time that Paole had survived kirten fever, the man offered a tonic for Paole to take and didn’t even charge for it. His generosity didn’t stop Paole telling Yveni to throw it away as worthless when they were alone. Mathias had always been scathing about the things, and the last thing Paole wanted in a weakened body was some quack medicine that would do more harm than good.

When he woke again, they were on the move. It was a little like being a slave again, not knowing where he was going or what was planned. He didn’t enjoy the feeling, but he hadn’t the energy to stamp his approval on whatever Yveni would do. Not yet.

The days passed in a haze. He never left the wagon, relieving himself in a pot, and Yveni fetched and carried for him with a terrifying determination. The boy kept up a steady supply of tea and honey, light broth, a little bread now and then, some well-cooked rabbit meat when he felt Paole could handle it. Paole was washed down daily with warm water, his clothes changed when he needed it. The world went on without his help, and all he had to do was sleep and recover.

The weather grew steadily warmer, and at times the air in the wagon was stifling. Finally Paole could bear it no longer, and when he felt they had stopped at a campsite, he struggled out of the wagon under his own power. Yveni was there at the wagon steps immediately to help him. “What are you doing? You shouldn’t be up.”

“You’re a nag as well as a brat, aren’t you? Need fresh air.”

“Why didn’t you say? I could have—” Yveni stopped, probably realising that even his immense stubbornness could not force the breeze to blow.

“Let me sit, boy.”

Yveni helped him sit under a large spreading tree. The relief from the heat was blissful, and his headache eased as soon as he was out of the sun. He looked around and realised he recognised the spot. A place Mathias always stopped at, near a river. Yes, he knew that pink and grey stone boulder, and that tall tree. They had to be outside Tarnul.

“How are you feeling?” Yveni asked.

“Better. Stronger.”

“Not well.”

“No. But I think I could stop in Tarnul and sell some scripts.”

Yveni arched a sceptical eyebrow. “Oh yes.”

“Tomorrow.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Brat.”

Yveni tsked. “You’re the worst patient I’ve ever seen, Paole.”

“Hate being sick, that’s all. Just leave me here while you do whatever you’re doing. What *are* you doing?”

“I was about to set some traps. Thought we could stay here a couple of days so I can hunt some fresh meat and do some baking. There’s no hurry to reach Dadel, is there?”

“None at all. I’d like to go to town.”

Yveni folded his arms, a familiar glint of obduracy in his eyes. “You can hardly stand.”

“Don’t need to stand. People come to me. I can set up a stall in the market, sit on a stool all day.”

“How about day after tomorrow, and I go with you?”

He didn’t like being argued with, but a compromise was better than nothing. “All right. Leave me outside, though. Too hot in there. How long has it been?”

“Since we left? Ten days. I’ve stopped more than we planned, so I can trap and do laundry. Thought it would be easier on you.”

“Aye. Take your time, boy. The cabin can wait.”

He was in no hurry to reach it and be left with his own company. When they’d started this journey towards his house, it had felt like a place of refuge. Now he was a little stronger, he remembered why he’d gone to Kivnic in the first place. Irony he’d been through all this to end up in exactly the same situation. By the time he reached Dadel, he should be strong enough to care for himself. Yveni could buy a horse from Jurgen and be at a port on the west coast within two weeks, in Horches a week after that. No reason at all for him to stay over the winter.

Yveni squinted at him. “Now what’s wrong?”

“Nothing, boy. Be about your business and let me enjoy the quiet while you’re gone.”

The boy pulled a face and walked off. Paole leaned back against the tree. No, there was really no hurry to reach the place where he’d have to face the solitude.

It actually took three days before he felt he could go to Tarnul, but he refused to return to the wagon. He sat or dozed in the open air during the day, slept with Yveni in the tent at night. Yveni got on with the heavy chores, including washing the blankets and letting them dry in the hot summer sun, and air-drying meat to preserve it. Paole could do little more than prepare the sachets of remedies that sold well—pain relief, cold and cough mixtures, remedies to ease bruises, back ache and biliousness. Mathias had a tooth powder that was popular in some towns. He’d try that here again.

Yveni drove into Tarnul, disapprovingly thin-lipped. He didn’t think Paole should do this so soon. But if Paole let this route slip too far, he’d never recover it, and it was his livelihood. He had to show his face to make sure people remembered him, if he wanted to return to it once he’d recovered his health. If he ever did.

And the beggar had the nerve to call *him* stubborn, Yveni thought in exasperation as he left Paole sleeping like a dead man in the tent. He’d *known* going back to Tarnul a second day would be a mistake but would Paole listen? Of course not. And now they wouldn’t be able to travel the next day at all. Paole had earned some money, and they had food for a week, but at what cost?

It had been an interesting experience, though. Yveni now knew why so many of the poorer folk trusted Paole more than the local healer. Paole spoke on their level, understood their concerns, and why “three days’ rest” simply wasn’t practical for a mother with children under foot, a man with a farm to work or an apprentice with a busy master. He talked without arrogance to an elderly person unsure about a new treatment, and with compassion to a dying man who only sought some relief from the constant pain. To watch Paole at his simple stall dealing with the steady stream of anxious people, sending them away with hope and help, had been a privilege.

And something that had worn the stupid beggar out. Nothing to be done about it now. Yveni had plenty of chores to get on with, and Peni never minded a rest, so what harm would it do?

At least he’d seen no sign of Konsatin still making a hue and cry about him. No one had looked amiss at him, or commented on his accent or that he was with Paole. Their story that he was Paole’s new apprentice had been easily accepted. Paole planned to have the manumission papers witnessed before Yveni parted company with him, to give him a cover identity for travel, but there was no need for that as yet. Yveni was in no hurry to leave, which surprised him as much as it irritated Paole. He was, to his astonishment, enjoying himself, much as he had working with Raina.

So when Paole woke from his deep slumber and declared that he wanted to take up his practice again as best he could as they made their way to Dadel, Yveni only raised a token resistance. He could buy a horse at any time, and if Paole continued to improve, in two or three months Yveni could part from him with a clear conscience. A few months felt like a healthily distant prospect. He'd be ready to leave then.

They fell easily into a routine. Paole slept in the wagon as Yveni drove them from town to town, and spent two or three days in each place with Yveni's assistance, with as much time for rest and recovery as he needed before they set off again. Yveni spent his free time reading up about treatments and medicines, and teaching Paole to read his native tongue, since the man was determined to understand the book Yveni had found.

The evenings passed easily, companionably. Paole could usually manage to sit up for an hour or two to talk about his healing craft, and Yveni, whose happiest memories revolved around being with Sofia or Gil as they worked, and learning what he could from watching and listening, loved to hear him speak. Of his past, Paole said little. Yveni understood the man didn't want to reopen the scars, and respected his privacy. Of Yveni's past, Paole couldn't hear enough. The time together once spent in sullen, angry silence now rang with conversation, and even laughter.

They'd been on the road over a month, when in a town called Haente, a youth with a lovely, heart-shaped face approached Paole at his table as he dispensed. Yveni was talking to another customer and only saw the two conversing. But he knew at once who this boy was, or at least, *what* he was. His face grew hot and he turned away, forcing himself to concentrate on the nice elderly lady who was so worried about Master Paole's health and determined to press a basket of baike fruit upon them. He accepted the gift graciously, assuring her that Master Paole was fine and recovering well. But his mind remained half on the unheard conversation to his left and the mobile features of the beautiful young man.

The youth pressed Paole's hands quickly between his own, and gave him a wistful smile as he left. Yveni bit his tongue. Now was not the time to ask, nor the place.

Even after all these weeks, the town visits left Paole exhausted by the end of the day, and he accepted Yveni's shoulder to lean on as they walked back to the wagon, burdened with the gifts of those who couldn't pay and the coin of those who could. Paole would need to restock on herbs, he said. Business was booming.

No need to cook that night, as one of the gifts had been two small roast birds and a loaf of seeded bread. Washed down with mugs of sweetened tea, it made a handsome meal on a balmy late-summer evening. Paole was too tired to work on his Uemi reading, and Yveni felt like a break, so they lounged in front of the campfire and let the meal digest.

"You seem to be handling it better," Yveni remarked, looking critically at his friend and judging his condition. No sign of a headache or stress. Just the loose-limbed relaxation of someone who had worked up to, but not past, his limits.

"Aye. I think there was something in that theory about the fever. I've spoken to several healers, and all expected me to be in much worse health. Hoped I would be, no doubt."

"Ah. Too bad for them."

"That's what I thought." Paole smiled a little over his mug of tea.

"Your friend isn't going to visit?"

"Eh?"

"The...um, boy. You know. The pretty one."

"Ah. No. I'm feeling better than I hoped but...not yet. And not with you around. Seems a bit unfriendly."

"Don't mind me. I'm only temporary. You don't want to deny your friends on my account."

"I'm not denying...why are you cross?"

"I'm not." But Yveni sounded cross even to his own ears. "You should do what you like."

"You mean like die quietly on my own of kirtan fever as I wanted."

Yveni screwed up his face. "That was just stupidity and you know it."

"But it was what I *liked* to do."

Yveni refused to dignify that response with an answer, pouring himself more tea and not meeting Paole's eyes.

Paole said nothing for some time, and Yveni let himself be mesmerised by the play of flame on wood, the glow and fade on the embers. Paole's low voice startled him a little when he spoke. "It's a lonely life, this. I think that's why my last master bought me. He wanted the company."

"You were looking for an apprentice. Will you find one?"

"Not this year. The boys are kind, but when they leave, I feel...sometimes I wonder if it's better to have nothing at all, than something wonderful that's taken away from you."

Yveni didn't know himself. "You wouldn't take any of them with you?"

"None of them would come with me. I've asked. It's not the sex so much..."

Yveni's face heated again and it was some moments before he could trust his voice to ask, "So much as what?"

"As being held. The only times I felt happy as a child was when I was being held, or holding someone. Another boy, a puppy, anything. I just wanted to feel close to something alive."

Yveni drank more tea to hide the colour in his cheeks. "Because you missed your mother?"

"Most likely. But to talk to someone too. Mathias talked all the time. Used to drive me mad sometimes. I think he was making up for when he'd been alone for so long."

"Mathias was your last master."

Paole nodded. "Died of old age winter before last. A good man."

"Did you love him?"

“I...respected him. Liked him. But he was a master. I couldn’t forget that.”

Had Mathias longed for Paole to do just that? Paole was an uncommonly handsome man. Had he perhaps wanted more than companionship?

“What will you do? Keep looking for an apprentice?”

“Don’t know. I never chose this path. Once or twice I’ve thought of going to Horches, or southern Karvis, where there are more of my kind. But making decisions makes me tired lately. I don’t want to even think of the winter.”

Why the winter? But then Yveni remembered what Paole had said about spending the winters in Dadel with his master. Just the two of them before and now him alone—and he feared being alone. “I’ll be gone by then.”

“I know that, boy. Don’t need to keep reminding me.”

The sudden harshness of his tone hit Yveni like a slap after all the friendly conversation. Like before, when Paole had been his master, when there was no trust or honesty between them.

Yveni quickly drank his tea and climbed to his feet. “Early night for me. I’ll see you in the tent.”

He walked off before Paole could call him back. He relieved himself and dove into the tent and under his blankets, hoping to be asleep before the big man came to bed. Paole’s company caused him unease now only at night. The more agreeable he became towards Yveni, the harder it was to ignore the fact a fine-looking, very manly man slept mere centimetres from him. Even Paole’s rudeness tonight couldn’t dampen these unwanted feelings. These *new* feelings.

He wasn’t asleep by the time Paole slid silently into the tent and onto his bedroll. Deep breathing and careful stillness wouldn’t fool Paole because his Healing Sight gave the lie away.

“Yveni, I’m sorry I snapped.”

“It’s all right.”

“No, it’s not. The truth is...I’ll miss you when you go. I know you have to go, and it’s right that you do, but I can’t pretend it won’t hurt. Just don’t want to be reminded, that’s all.”

“I know. I’ll...um...be sorry to leave. I’m enjoying it.”

“I’m glad of that. And who knows, maybe I’ll end up in Sardelsa looking for that training.”

“I’d like that. I wish it wasn’t all so far in the future.”

“Something to look forward to is no bad thing. Good night.”

“Sleep well, Paole.”

Chapter Nineteen

After that, they no longer pretended they weren't dawdling, neither of them anxious to reach Paole's cabin, and Yveni knowing he might have years of useless idleness ahead of him before he could act against Konsatin. The only pretence they made was that Yveni would use the knowledge Paole was determined to pour into his head. Paole would certainly use the Uemi, which he practised writing and speaking with Yveni whenever he could. Yveni wondered if the plan to go to Horches was more than a wistful dream for the man, and if he might go sooner rather than later. He didn't dare ask. Talking about the future was too fraught for both of them.

Paole continued to steadily improve, but it would be some time before he felt completely well. He'd lost weight and still tired too easily, though he no longer needed to sleep in the wagon while they travelled, or spend a day resting for each day working.

The pretty boys continued to approach Paole. Each time he gently turned one away, a strange and embarrassing mixture of jealousy, relief and irritation boiled up within Yveni's heart. He hated that Paole adjusted his behaviour in such a matter because of him, but was very glad not to have to listen to two men having sex while *he* wasn't. But then it annoyed him that he gave a damn who Paole slept with at all. It was childish of him, and he was no longer a child, in years or in reality, though sometimes he felt no wiser than he had been at eight. When Paole gave him one of his rare, sweet smiles, Yveni's tongue tangled up the way it had when he'd been a shy, motherless boy. He'd have to turn away rather than risk making a fool of himself by speaking.

In a little village called Nurn, Paole spent a good deal of time at a farm where the farmer's wife supplied him with some of the rarer herbs and seeds he needed for conditions such as women's heavy monthly courses and persistent skin rashes. The rather cranky and odd woman made it clear she grudgingly welcomed Paole as a customer but she didn't want to deal with his manservant. Yveni loitered in the farmyard, admiring the poultry and wondering if he could buy eggs and feed for Peni here instead of waiting until the next town.

"You're new."

Yveni turned around at the question and found himself facing a sweet-faced youth of about his own age. "Yes, I'm Master Paole's new apprentice."

"Aren't you a little old for that?"

"Perhaps."

The boy stared with more intensity than politeness. What had Yveni done to offend him?

"I'd been looking forward to Master Paole calling again this year."

"Ah. Good?"

The youth moved closer. "No, it's not," he said in a low resentful voice. "Now *you're* with him."

"I'm just his apprentice."

"Of course you are. He was asking for a companion to travel with him last year. I guess he found one."

"Look, I just work for him."

"Maybe. If so, you're either blind or stupid. Some people don't know the chances they have."

The boy turned on his heel and left. Yveni raised his eyebrows in surprise at such a rude conversation from a complete stranger, not to mention the assumption that Paole would automatically sleep with his apprentice. Or that the apprentice would want—

He stepped firmly on that thought. There was entirely too much unseemly talk about sex lately. He was a vicont, not a...a...whatever one called these boys who slept so happily with itinerant merchants. It wasn't moral at all. If Paole wanted to pleasure himself that way, well, Yveni could make excuses because the man had so few chances of company. But these boys exploited his need quite shamelessly.

Full of righteous indignation, he didn't even bother mentioning the strange encounter to Paole. Why should he bear messages from spurned men?

Then he had an almost identical conversation with not one but two boys in the next town. Righteous indignation gave way to bemusement at the assumptions by these youths. It was funny, in a sad way. One would think Paole was the only man left in the world, the way these vacant, pretty creatures carried on.

Paole returned from the healer he'd gone to visit just as Yveni had disposed of the last idiotic discussion on this subject. Paole jerked a thumb in the direction of the latest handsome twit. "What did Lars want?"

Yveni sighed. "Are you aware that half the people you've slept with assume you hired me to sleep with you and the other half think I'm insane because I'm *not* sleeping with you? They're not very bright, are they?"

Paole's mouth twitched suspiciously. "How many of them have you talked to?"

"Too many. If I find you've been telling them any of this nonsense, it'll go hard with you, I swear."

"I haven't. I think they're just..."

"Just...?"

"Uh...nothing."

"Paole?"

"Never mind, boy. Time to go back to camp."

Yveni *hated* being called “boy”, and he hated people hiding things from him. He sulked about it all the way back to their campsite. Between the stupidity of Paole’s paramours and Paole himself, he felt a sulk quite justified.

Paole ignored his mood, talking quietly about this and that while he stirred the bean stew that had been cooking in a hay oven all day. As he handed over a serving to Yveni, he said, “If any of them ask you again, tell them I’d never hire someone to sleep with me and who you sleep with is your own business.”

“That’s what I *have* been saying. They won’t listen!”

“Oh. Then I don’t know what else to say.”

“Nor I. You certainly have been thorough.”

“They just come to me,” he murmured. “I never ask.”

“They’re like dogs sniffing around a bitch in heat.”

Paole wagged his spoon. “No need to be rude.”

“They are.”

“You sound like you’re jealous.”

“I’m not! What of them? You can sleep with any of them, I told you that. I don’t like them assuming you’re sleeping with me, that’s all.”

“Well, you are.”

Yveni gave him an evil glare. “You know what I mean. You can be such a bastard.”

“And you’re a prickly little brat. Tell them to run away if they bother you. Or to talk to me. You don’t need to behave like you’re a stallion guarding a mare, defending your right to fuck her.”

Yveni pursed his lips, climbed to his feet and stomped off before he said something he *truly* regretted.

How ridiculous. He was supposed to be going to Horches, to regain his rightful place on the ducal throne of Sardelsa, and what was he doing with his life? Arguing with farm boys about who slept with, with...*him*. And he wasn’t *defending* anything. Or anyone. Certainly not anyone’s mare. Or their bitches.

He could die of embarrassment. Was it too late to run away? He should never have mentioned those idiot children and their even more idiotic conversations.

A heavy hand landed on his shoulder and he flinched. He whirled on his accoster. “What the hell are you doing, frightening me like that?”

Paole held his hands up. “Why are you so angry? I’m only teasing, and those boys mean no harm. Why waste energy on being upset?”

Yveni drew himself up. “I am a vicont of Sardelsa, not a brothel owner. Please arrange your affairs without my assistance.”

Paole burst out laughing.

“I’m serious!” Yveni wanted to hit him.

"I know." Paole could barely get the words out for giggling. "You just sound...you should hear yourself. 'Not a brothel owner'," he mimicked, and whacked his thighs to express his hilarity. Damn the man.

"It's not funny."

"Of course it's not."

Yveni gritted his teeth. Why him, honestly. "I'm going to tell the next one who comes up to me that you've been saving yourself specially for him and you're expecting a full night of conjugal activity. Then you can deal with his disappointment."

"Maybe I won't have to. Things have been working better in that area too."

"I do *not* want to know about this, Paole. Please remember my position."

Paole, still grinning, made an elaborate bow. "Oh, so sorry, your gracefulness. I had no idea who I was dealing with. Would you like me to lie down so you can walk over me back to the campfire without your feet touching the unworthy ground?"

"You can stop this any time, you know. You're not the least amusing."

"Of course not."

He contorted his face trying not to smile, and though Yveni did his best to look disapproving, Paole's expression was so ridiculous, he couldn't keep it up. "You're *horrid*."

"Yes, I am. How about you come back and eat your stew, and I'll try not to put my common person in your way."

Still grumpy, Yveni agreed, even allowing Paole to replace his cold helping of food with a fresh, hot one. As he ate and ran over the ridiculous conversation in his head, something bothered him. As he set the empty bowl down, he turned to Paole, determined to make one thing clear.

"I don't think less of you because you're not noble. You know that, don't you?"

"Yes. Not that I'd care. I was only having a bit of fun with you, boy."

"Please don't call me that."

Paole lifted his eyebrows. "I've been calling you that for months."

"Yes, and I hate it. Anyway, I turned eighteen weeks ago. I'm not a boy."

"All right."

"Thank you."

Paole grunted and went on eating. Yveni drank his tea, and wished he could learn to keep himself under more control than he'd shown tonight. When he returned to court, he would face more than a little gentle teasing from his nobles. The ducal cabinet discussions could be quite fiery. Besides, it pleased him Paole felt comfortable enough to make fun. They'd buried the hostility of the past, and Yveni was glad of that.

He hadn't, unfortunately, buried the other troubling emotions, and the conversation over supper had only stirred things up more. He'd never been so plagued by strange dreams and desires before, or such frequent nightly emissions. Doctor Kardwil had always taken pains to explain they were normal in a healthy teenager, but when camping out they were as tiresome as they were embarrassing. While the weather was so warm, perhaps he should sleep outside. There was always a risk of rain at night, though. There had been a shower the night before. Better to stay under cover.

So he curled up on his bedroll and tried to think of calming things, like the price of the grain they'd bought today, and designing a more efficient rabbit snare. By the time Paole came into the tent, he'd succeeded so well that he was on the edge of sleep.

"Yveni? You awake?"

He considered not answering, but Paole would know anyway. He settled for a noncommittal grunt.

"I'd never sleep with someone I employed. I wanted you to know that."

Yveni grunted again. Why did he have to bring this up?

"I know you're not really working for me, but I didn't want you to think I'd do something like that."

So why wasn't he sleeping with him? Was he not good enough? Yveni suppressed a squeak of alarm as these thoughts popped into his head.

He *had* to stop thinking like this. Paole was...was...Paole. This wasn't a suitable...anything.

"Are you all right?" Paole asked.

"I'm fine. Tired. Thanks for telling me."

"That's all right. Anyway, I know it's different for the nobles and kings."

Paole lay down, but now Yveni was wide awake and annoyed. "*What's* different?"

"Who you sleep with. Always within your class. If those boys knew the truth they'd know it was ridiculous to think of you wanting to sleep with me. I'm only an ex-slave."

Yveni sat up and glared in the direction of his irritating friend. "I told you, that doesn't matter to me. You're more than good enough to sleep with, and for your information, it's not ridiculous."

"Oh?"

The soft voice and sly tone, told him he'd walked right into a carefully laid trap. Desperately he tried to escape it. "But I don't want to sleep with you. Not for that reason."

"Are you sure?"

"Y-yes. Quite sure."

"So why isn't it ridiculous that you would want to?" Had Paole moved closer? His voice was closer.

"I...uh...meant...someone like you. Another ex-slave. Theoretically."

"Theoretically. But not me."

"No."

"Why?"

"Because...I don't like you!"

"Ah. I'm sorry. I won't bother you again."

The tent fell silent. To Yveni's ears, the loudest sound was the thump of his heart, trying to escape his chest. "I didn't mean that. I just meant..."

"I'm undesirable."

"Yes. No! You are! Very. Desirable, I mean. Very well made."

"Handsome, you said."

"Yes." He'd just walked into another trap, hadn't he? "Are you playing with me again?"

He jumped violently as Paole's big hand cupped his cheek. All Yveni's concentration narrowed to the feel of the calloused, dry palm against his face. Paole stroked his skin with his thumb. "No. But you've been dancing around me for a little while, and you were so flustered earlier, I thought I'd find out exactly what was going on in that pretty head of yours."

"Pretty?"

"Yes. Lovely. Handsome. Desirable. Tell me to stop and I'll never mention it again."

"I'm not pretty."

He didn't sound convincing even to himself, and Paole chuckled. "Do you really not want to sleep with me?"

"I don't want to sleep with anyone. I should be going to Horches."

"So you should." Paole removed his hand. "I misunderstood. Forgive me."

This time it wasn't a trap. "Paole?"

"Yes, Yveni."

"Um...it's not so much don't *want* as...it's not appropriate." That was the right word, yes. He felt quite satisfied at getting it out.

"Why?"

"Because..." *You own me.* No, that wasn't true. *You were sick and I looked after you so it's like a healer and his patient.* That wasn't true either. "I want to be your friend, and if we sleep together..."

"We can still be friends."

"And if we don't?"

"Makes no difference to me."

"*That's* why I can't sleep with you! It should make a difference. Sex is...for people who love each other. Who are married, preferably. Those...those boys, they're just...using you."

Paole laughed. "Oh, you have some strange ideas, bo...Yveni. If it worries you this much, forget I mentioned it. I only wanted to make it clear you could if you wanted, since it bothered you."

"It didn't. It isn't. I'm not bothered and I never think about it. Good night."

"Good night, your gracefulness."

Yveni growled and rolled over, determined not to let this matter ever enter his thoughts again.

Which was as effective as telling himself not to think of the word “purple”. To make himself not think about it, he had to think about it. So not thinking about sleeping with Paole meant...

“Damn it to *hell*.”

He fled the tent, pausing only to grab his boots and jam them on his feet before stalking over to the fire. He gave it an aggressive poke and threw more wood onto it as if it mortally offended him by existing.

He hunched forward and stared into the flames. How was he supposed to ride alongside Paole tomorrow as if nothing had happened? Nothing *had* happened. Unfortunately.

His mind was a foul, foul traitor and he was unfit to rule a herd of kardips, let alone a duchy.

“Yveni.”

He started and fell forward, barely avoiding the fire, and had to struggle clumsily to right himself. “What?”

Paole hunkered down across from him. “I’m sorry to upset you.”

“*Now* you’re sorry. Why did you even bring it up?”

“I thought it might clear the air a little. I thought...your feelings were more straightforward. Just forget about it and come back to the tent.”

“No, I’m going to sit here and think.” *Until you’re asleep.*

“I’d do nothing to hurt you, you understand. Or drive you away sooner...than you have to go. If you want to go now, I’ll understand, but I...”

“You?”

Paole gave him a little smile, but his eyes didn’t lift with it. “Don’t want you to.”

“Come to Horches with me.”

“What? I can’t.”

“Why not?” Yveni stood. “You’ve been thinking about it. Your Uemi’s excellent now and by the time we arrived, I could make you fluent in reading and writing it. You could set up a healer practice or a herbalist’s, and you’d never have to deal with another snotty Karvi. And...um...you’d have company.”

“Until you return to Sardelsa.”

“Which might never happen. And by then, you’ll be with your own people and who knows, even your own family.” It was such a wonderful idea. Yveni was so pleased to have come up with it. “Say yes?”

“No, I can’t.”

“Why, by all the gods? What’s keeping you here?”

“Nothing. Everything. It’s none of your business, boy.”

Yveni turned and scowled into the darkness. So he was supposed to give up all his secrets and feelings, but Paole could be as close-mouthed as he wanted.

"You say 'go back' like it's easy," Paole murmured. "Like I want to return with a slave mark on my arm, and a foreign accent, and nothing to show for twenty-eight years except another man's life work. Scarred and marked and damaged. When you go home, you'll be cheered in the streets. No one wants me in Horches or anywhere else."

Yveni whirled.

"That's not true! I want you." He realised what he'd said and he clapped his hand over his mouth. Paole remained very still, only his green eyes staring up at Yveni in surprise.

"How?" Paole whispered. "As a travelling companion?"

Yveni forced himself to consider his answer. Paole was no longer teasing, no longer tried to trap him. His eyes demanded complete honesty.

"No. As a...a friend. A good friend. Paole, I want you to come with me, if it pleases you."

Paole rose. Always a shock to realise just how tall he was, and even after the fever, so broad and strong. He advanced on Yveni, who made himself hold his ground, though his knees shook.

Paole stopped a little way short of him. "It pleases me." His voice was husky, raw. "*You* please me." His hands closed into fists, opened again. His eyes, firelight glinting in their depths, burned like the fire itself. "I'm sorry. I can't stop myself...Yveni, tell me the truth. Tell me you don't want me so I can stop...hoping."

Yveni trembled too hard to speak. He could only shake his head.

Paole's shoulders sagged. "Very well." He turned.

He couldn't...to lose him now...no. "N-no! S-stop!" He reached out his hands and grabbed Paole's sleeve. "N-not w-what I m-meant." He dragged in a deep breath, and another. "Meant...I can't tell you. Not true. Come here."

Paole moved towards him, Yveni holding a determined grip on his sleeve and tugging.

"You want me?"

"I don't want...don't want you to go. I don't know what the rest means. Help me."

Paole stepped up and wrapped his big arms around him. As his warmth and strength enfolded Yveni, his trembling stopped. He laid his cheek on Paole's broad chest and sighed. "This is what I want," he whispered. "To be with you."

Chapter Twenty

He couldn't speak. When he'd started the teasing that evening, Paole hadn't had any idea it would lead to this. Hadn't dared *believe* it could. But with Yveni in his arms, trustingly, peacefully, there was nothing left for him to wish for. The ache that had been constantly in his heart for months, years, eased and disappeared. Yveni wanted him. Wanted *him*. A beaten-up ex-slave with a bad temper and bad memories. Yveni had seen the worst of him. And yet he wanted him.

"Come to bed."

Yveni suddenly clutched at his shirt and stared up at him. "I don't know how to sleep with you."

Paole bent and laid a respectful kiss on Yveni's forehead. "Yes, you do because we've done it for months. Relax."

He had a notion how to break the boy's nervous tension. He swooped and gathered Yveni up into his arms—a struggle, yes, but well worth the startled laugh and outrage. "Put me down. I'm not a child!"

"Hmmm, funny, you weigh as little as one. Take it easy, your highness."

"Paole, put me down!"

"Hush, we're nearly there."

He deposited the boy in front of the tent, and grinned as he received a well-earned thump on the arm for his prank. "Don't *ever* pick me up like that again, you bastard. Not unless I'm unconscious or dying."

"Right you are. So...we're here."

Yveni's indignation melted away. His uncertain look made Paole want to hug him again, and why not.

"It was only a lark. Don't be cranky."

"I know. You're still horrid."

Paole grinned into the darkness. "I am. Are you coming?"

"Will we really just sleep?"

"Whatever you like. Come inside."

He stripped off his boots, as did Yveni, then he tugged the boy into the tent. They already slept side by side. It had been a particularly refined torment for months.

"Do you mind if we share blankets?"

"Don't be silly, Paole."

Yveni melted against him as if they had been lovers for years. Paole kissed his cheek, then his lips, wondering if this virginal lad would shy away, but no. Clumsy, yes, he might be, but hesitant, not at all. He

tasted warm and healthy, his mouth a lush and generous bounty. Paole had slept with boys just as pretty, just as lithe and willing, but Yveni...Yveni was proud and wilful, and his innocent surrender all the sweeter for its completeness.

He closed his eyes and let his Sight explore Yveni's body. The boy thrummed with good health, the arteries bright and clear, his lungs and heart unshadowed by any failure. He glowed like a blue sky on a hot summer day, almost too brilliant to look at, warming to be near. Young and perfect and whole. He saw so few like this.

Yveni laid his cheek against Paole's and slid his hand inside Paole's shirt. "How long?" he breathed. "How long have you thought of me this way?"

"When you said you were in no hurry to leave. It made me think of what it would be like when you did."

"So you didn't like me from the start?"

"No, because you were a horrible little brat." He yelped because the "brat" had nipped his earlobe. "Still are."

"You're not very nice at all, are you?"

"No, your gracefulness, I'm not. But I won't play you false."

Yveni lay still, almost on top of him. His silence stretched a little too long for comfort. "Did I say something wrong?"

"No...Paole, the duchy will expect me to marry. Infidelity in a duc is unthinkable."

It was a long leap from a few kisses to Yveni having a lover behind his wife's back. "You said it was years away, boy."

Yveni slapped his chest. "Don't *call* me that. You always sound so snide."

"Sorry. I only meant...you're getting ahead of yourself, don't you think?"

"Oh. This is just a dalliance to you."

"A what?" The boy knew so many words.

"A...temporary thing. Like with those others." He'd gone all stiff and unfriendly in Paole's embrace.

"No, not like... Yveni, I know you so much better than them. I want to know you more. Can't we...see where it goes? Isn't that how such things work?"

"Not for nobles and ducs. When we're betrothed, the other person is our beloved from that moment. We're told we'll love each other and be together for the rest of our lives."

"And is that what happens?"

"I don't know. My sister didn't love Konsatin, I know that. She still has to marry him unless I can stop it."

"I'm not noble, and I won't love to order."

"Have you ever been in love?"

“Slaves aren’t given that kind of freedom. We always know others of our kind can be ripped away at a moment’s notice, and of course, our owners would never want us to look at them or their families.”

Yveni fell silent again. Paole sighed quietly. A few minutes ago, this had been all so simple. He should have realised a slave and a noble would never be allowed anything ordinary.

“It’s confusing,” Yveni murmured. “I have these feelings inside me. I want to be with you, want to be held, to hold. To kiss...” Paole helpfully obliged to remind him how good kissing could be. “But I always thought such feelings would come to me from someone I could be with forever. You’re a good man, but there’s so much I don’t know about you.”

“Same is true for you. You’re thinking too hard. Sleep with me now, and we can take it slow.”

“But I want you to come to Horches.”

“Ah, well. I need to think on that a little more. You’re a lovely lad, but it’s a big step. I need more than your kisses to entice me.”

“I never...I mean...you should come because it’s right for you! Don’t...gods, I’d hate you to make a decision because of...”

Paole grinned. He could *hear* Yveni blushing. “Peace, sweetness. I’ll make the choice after I think over things.”

“You call your *horse* ‘sweetness’.”

He ignored the danger in the flat tone. “Aye, and like Peni all you needed was a bit of persuasion and training. Ow.” He rubbed his jaw. “If you’re going to be a biter, maybe I should gag you.”

“Don’t even try. My knee’s where it can do the most damage.”

“Such a violent creature. Sleep.” He found Yveni’s hand and entwined his fingers with the boy’s. “We have time. Relax.”

Yveni kissed him again, slowly, drowsily. Paole, exhausted from a long day, let the gentle caress of Yveni’s lips pull him into slumber.

The sun was high in the heavens when they roused themselves. Waking to kisses and an armful of lovely lad always put him in a good mood, so he was in no great hurry to move. Finally, though, he had to. “We can’t lie abed all day.”

“Mmm, shame.” But then Yveni sat up and pushed his black hair back off his face before staring down at him and smiling. “That was nice.”

“It was. Taking it slow isn’t a luxury I’ve had before.”

“We have time, you said. Are we moving on today?”

“Well, that’s something to decide. At this rate, we’ll barely make Dadel before it snows. If you want to push on to Horches, we need to move faster.”

Yveni's mouth turned down. "I won't push, Paole. I won't make promises either. I have a duty to my homeland."

"I know, lad. If I choose to go, I won't do it on your account, whatever my feelings. We should move on a little faster anyway. The next town isn't important. I'll skip it—I could stand to rest a while."

"Then let's go, lazy." He leapt up before Paole's playful swat could connect with his pert bottom.

Yveni leaned against him as he drove, his hand playing over Paole's chest while they talked about whether going to Horches was the right thing to do. He was torn, he had to admit it. Going home had been a dream when he was younger, but as he grew up, he realised all the obstacles that stood in his way. The idea of going back to Uemire and being rejected as an outsider, as no longer one of their own, filled him with terror. If he went, there would be no returning either, not to Dadel and Mathias's cabin. He didn't know if he was brave enough to rebuild his life a third time. First enslaved, then freed, and now...freed again? Or enslaved again by a pair of clever brown eyes and a brave, impulsive soul.

"You've got a headache, haven't you?" Yveni reached up and rubbed the back of his neck, which didn't help but felt nice anyway. "Sorry. Maybe we shouldn't talk about this so much."

"Never mind."

"Would you be happier in the south? With other freed slaves?"

"Maybe. I'm tired of thinking of myself as a slave, or an ex-slave. I want to be me, not what I was forced to be."

"I feel like that sometimes." Yveni stared off into the distance. "It's why I loved being with Gil and Sofia. They always treated me as me, not the vicont or the heir. Gil would cuff me if I was naughty and praise me for doing well, without trying to suck up to me. Even the really nice servants were always trying to do that. I've spent more time since I left Sardelsa living like a real person than I ever did in the castle."

"Don't go back then."

"I have to. My sisters need me. The duchy needs me. I was born to this. I can't walk away from it."

Why not? If Yveni had drowned in the shipwreck, the duchy would have to manage without him. But then, he came from a different world. He saw things in a way Paole never could.

It was a week to Nermil, their next planned stop. By then, Paole privately promised himself, he'd make a decision one way or another. Yveni distracted him quite pleasantly with his kisses and affectionate touches. They went no further, even at night with Yveni's erection hard against his leg, and his own cock filled with yearning for his companion. Yveni placed too great an importance on sex for Paole to push for more, and Paole enjoyed the tenderness almost more than fucking. It was as new to him as it was to Yveni, and he wanted to take his time.

They arrived in Nermil on a cloudy, wet day, but the town thronged with people undeterred by the weather, busily buying the newly harvested produce and readying themselves for the cold season. He'd barely set up his little stall when two patients came to him, wanting remedies or diagnosis. All morning he

and Yveni had no time to stop and talk at all, the lad busily dispensing the prepacked doses or skilfully measuring out fresh ones to Paole's order.

"We've just run out of eun seed and there's little left of the vere leaf," Yveni announced when they'd been at it for several hours.

"If you have my list, run along to Master Dieter, and order a half kilo of the seed and leaf as well. Here's the coin you need."

Yveni took it and ran off. Paole pardoned the interruption with his customer and continued listening patiently to a long list of complaints that had no obvious physical cause, so far as he could tell.

"Fancy someone like him ordering a good Karvi boy about in that manner."

"Everywhere you turn around there's another damn Uemirien. They should send them back where they came from if their masters don't want them any more."

Paole stuttered in his advice, his face heating up in anger at what he'd just heard behind him. He twisted around but couldn't detect the speakers among the people milling around.

"Master Paole?"

"Ah...forgive me, mistress." He turned back to his patient and with an effort, smiled at the old woman. "I have a special tonic which I find very strengthening. I used it after I recovered from the kirten fever just a few weeks ago. As you see, I'm quite well now."

"My goodness, so you are. It won't be too much for me, will it?"

"Half-strength, mistress. And only once a day. If you find it too much, cut it down to quarter strength. But don't ever be tempted to increase it. It could be too hard on your system. It's quite invigorating so it needs to be used with care."

He handed her two packets of a mild tea that would warm her blood and feel like it had some effect. "Now I'm giving you all the doses at once, but once you finish the course, it's not safe to repeat it. I think you might find you don't even need to finish it, and you could keep some in case of a recurrence. Don't dispense it to others, of course."

"Oh, I'd never do that, Master Paole. I know I don't have your skill. Do you think my heart will give me more trouble?"

"I guarantee that within a week, your heart will be working as well as it did twenty years ago, mistress." Since it already did, he felt happy to make that promise.

She left with a smile on her face. He had no leisure to find out who'd been talking earlier, for now he had another talkative patient.

"Master Paole, I'm pleased to see you. I wasn't sure you'd come through again." The plump matron sat down at his table.

"Of course I would, mistress," he said, taking her hand and assessing the state of her troublesome uterus. She'd been suffering from difficult periods, but reported the compound he'd prescribed previously

had continued to reduce the severity of her flows. He questioned her about her general health and routine, and was satisfied that there was no need to change the remedy offered.

“Continue with it then, and the liver diet.”

“Thank you. You take me so much more seriously than our healer in town,” she confided. “Though I do wonder why you didn’t go home once you were freed, master. You have no reason to remain in this country, after all.”

None but a practice and patients and a life he’d grown used to. He wondered if all ex-slaves faced this, and if the immigrants from Helser, coming to work in the mines, were questioned in this way. The woman, tactless as she was good-hearted, had no idea how insulting she sounded, and he wouldn’t tell her. He sent her on her way. Why had he ever thought he could grow old in this arrogant nation?

He turned to make a note of the amount dispensed and caught the stallholder behind sneering. “Can I help you?”

“I doubt it. Never catch me going to one of your kind with your black magic and your quack potions.”

Paole shook his head and bent to his notes. He’d heard it all before, though he’d thought he’d been coming to this town long enough that the folk here would know who he was. No matter how grateful his patients, how many people he helped, they’d never accept him. They might not be as openly hostile as Sheriff Rolf or this polite creature, but he was fooling himself if he thought attitudes would ever change. Not enough for him. If he stayed, he’d always be the outsider. Always be alone too.

The day’s work had been a success by any measure, and he should have been pleased at the profit and the goods in kind he and Yveni bore away. But all he felt was a kind of draining depression, overlain by the tiredness that still plagued him.

“Fried herbed gaete for your supper, and an early night,” Yveni told him as they returned to camp. “You’ll feel better after that.”

Paole grabbed him around the waist and pulled him close for a long, languorous kiss and deep hug. “*Now* I feel better.”

Yveni made no effort to free himself. “Silly man.”

“No, you’re my medicine and I prescribe you to be taken as often as possible.”

“You’ve lost your wits. Let me go or there’ll be no supper for either of us.” Still, he gave Paole another kiss and laid his head against his chest for a few moments, before going off to find what he needed for cooking.

Paole watched him prepare the meal, long fingers dexterous and precise as he jointed and floured and herbed. The pieces of gaete were laid in the fat to gently sizzle, and soon a delicious smell filled the night air. Paole’s stomach rumbled.

“There is a sack of huele nuts if you can’t wait.” Yveni poked the cooking meat and spoke without turning around.

"I'll wait. Yveni, I've made my decision."

The lad didn't turn or stop what he was doing, but the subtle change in the line of his back, the increase in his heart rate, meant he was listening carefully.

"I'm going to Horches. You're right. I don't belong here, and I never will."

Yveni looked over his shoulder and smiled. "You decided for reasons nothing to do with me?"

"Nothing to do with you. I want to be with others of my kind, and not just slaves and ex-slaves. I want to walk free and not have anyone resent it. If it fails, on my head be it. So we should make speed to Dadel."

"Yes." Yveni bit his lip and turned around to watch the frying pan.

"You don't seem pleased."

"I am. But now I'm worried that it might not be the right decision. You helped so many people today."

"Aye, and I can help people in Horches or somewhere else. The Karvi have healers. It's a rich country. The poor aren't well cared for, but I only see a tiny number of those who need help, and only once a year or so. I've done what I can for them. They've had my service for free since I was four. That's enough."

He hadn't meant to sound so bitter, since it wasn't the poor of this country that had enslaved him, but they were of the same race, and none saw anything wrong in using other races and nations to serve them in that way. In the whole time he'd lived in Karvis, he'd never heard a word uttered against slavery by any Karvi, even those who liked him.

"Yes, it is. You might not be able to come back here, or want to, but once I'm on the throne in Sardelsa, you will always have a home there, if you want it."

"Thanks, but Tuelers like Uemiriens no better than Karvi do."

Yveni turned to look at him. "This Tueler likes you fine." He leaned forward and kissed Paole on the lips. "How do you feel?"

"Settled. Decision's made. Now I have to make it work."

They were but a week from Dadel if they went directly and without stopping. Since there was much to do in preparation, Paole saw no reason to delay. He pushed Peni a little harder than they had of late, and spent more time driving each day, though Yveni took on much of that duty since Paole still tired more easily than he had before the fever.

They avoided Dadel itself and went straight to the cabin. Peni's pace picked up as she recognised the road to her home, but Yveni stared at the gloomy woods in dismay. "You live here alone during the winter? It's so dark. And..."

"Lonely."

Yveni laid his head on Paole's shoulder. "Yes."

“Not any more.”

Yveni only smiled.

The place needed airing and the dust sheets removed. They’d be here two weeks, Paole thought. Provided they left well before the snows, he could take the time to leave the place in good order.

Yveni wanted to poke around in everything—the library, the barn, the little clearing in which the cabin stood. Paole left him to it while he stabled Peni.

“Need to decide what to do with you, eh, sweetness.” He couldn’t see her making the journey to Horches, and to take her so far from familiar surroundings was cruel. He fed her some bran and considered his options.

He wandered over to the single spreading tree, under which he’d buried Mathias and placed his stone. He knelt down and cleared away the rampant weeds from the grave and marker, though it was a little pointless if he was leaving for good. Yveni had asked if he’d loved his master. He still didn’t know. But he forgave him for owning him. “You did your best, by your lights. Many did worse by me.”

He believed in no gods, nor in an afterlife. But it was hard not to imagine Mathias resting easily in this peaceful place, near the house that had been his home for more than fifty years.

He smelled smoke. Yveni must have set a fire going, and the other smells meant food. He’d have to buy supplies for their stay and for the trip, but he wasn’t anxious to encounter Sheriff Rolf right now. They had enough food for a few days, and Peni would do well on the grass growing so luxuriantly, without the need for hay.

He found Yveni making spicy battercakes, and a kettle sat on the stove ready to boil water for tea. “Made yourself at home, I see.”

“The two of you lived here for months at a time? It’s so tiny! I had a bathroom back at the castle bigger than this.”

“Well, not everyone was raised like a lord, your gracefulness. It was cosy enough, and we were company for each other.”

“Until he died.”

“Yes.”

Hands covered in flour, Yveni rubbed his cheek against Paole’s shoulder in sympathy. “Where did you sleep? There’s only the one bed.”

“On the floor.”

“What? That’s awful!”

“It’s all I expected. At least he gave me a thick bedroll and plenty of blankets. It was fine. You didn’t think I’d be in his bed, did you?”

Yveni flushed, which amused Paole. “Of course not. Making a servant sleep on the floor is barbaric.”

“I wasn’t a servant. I was property.”

“I thought you said he was a good man.”

“He was. But I was still property.”

Yveni made a face, his opinion of the matter clear enough.

The battercakes were good, as always with Yveni’s cooking, and the luxury of table and chairs was easier on travel-weary bones. Paole wished he’d thought to set the bath stove going. Tomorrow. Being back here overwhelmed him a little, with such a great change in his life looming, a new lover...

Well, almost a new lover. “You won’t make me sleep on the floor, I hope,” he said as Yveni, finished with his meal, thumbed through one of Mathias’s books.

“We’ll sleep together, silly.”

“First time in a real bed together.”

Yveni nodded, then looked up, suddenly red-cheeked again. “You said there was a bath here?”

“Aye, but too much trouble to set it heating. You can wash in a bucket. Washroom’s at the back, and the privy.”

“I’ll heat some water. I smell.”

They both did, but what did it matter...?

Hmmm. Paole would have given a good deal if he could have swapped his Healing Sight for the gift of mind reading just then.

Yveni had been dreaming of a hot bath, but it would have to wait. At least he had more privacy to clean himself properly, and tonight he wanted to be...special. Paole had been patient and gentle with him, but Yveni couldn’t be patient any more. They had two weeks with the use of a proper bed, and Yveni was determined he would shed his embarrassing virginity before they began the journey to Horches.

Paole, reading in the old chair near the bed, grunted when Yveni told him the washroom was free, and wandered out leisurely a few minutes later. Yveni built up the fire and stripped, laying his clothes neatly on the chair. Shivering in front of the fireplace, he ran his hands down his body. Would it please an experienced man? Paole liked his looks, but had never commented on the rest of him. Paole was so big, so muscled. Yveni’s slight build looked childlike next to him. He *wasn’t* a child, though. He was a man, with a man’s body, and a man’s...desires. Though exactly what that meant, he didn’t know. He put his hand over his cock. Was it big enough to please? He’d have to touch...

His cock filled as he thought of putting his hand on *Paole’s* manhood. A quite substantial manhood, from Yveni’s covert observations. What would it feel like? Would he be able to give pleasure? Would it feel different when Paole touched him?

He knew all about procreation and the necessity for sex, the realities of men and women coupling. Gil and Sofia had been frank about that with both Yveni and Serina, though Serina had been adamant that Konsatin would *not* be putting anything near her intimate parts, whatever position he chose. Yveni knew

what he was supposed to do with a woman when he married, though he'd never felt the least curiosity about trying it out with a woman other than his future wife. What he should do with a man, he had not the slightest idea. Now he wished he'd been brave enough to spy on Paole with his pretty paramours. Some of them had cried out and sounded as if they were in pain. Did it hurt? Was it supposed to hurt like it did with a woman the first time?

He chewed his lip. His cock had gone soft as he worried over these things. Would Paole be annoyed by his utter lack of knowledge? Gods, why wasn't there a book on such matters he could consult!

The outer door banged. Paole was returning. Yveni climbed onto the bed and tried to look enticing. That was what Serina called it, anyway, as she'd been made up for her betrothal. Yveni wondered if makeup and pretty clothes were required. Paole didn't strike him as much of a one for such things.

Paole came in, wearing a clean shirt and pants. He stopped dead as he spied Yveni, smiling invitingly. "Well now. What's this?"

"I want...I want t-to give myself to you. T-tonight."

"Is that right." Paole sat on the end of the bed. "The pulse at your throat is racing, you're sweating and your pupils are huge. You're either terrified or overcome with lust, and your cock disagrees with the latter. Are you scared?"

"A l-little nervous."

Paole traced a gentle finger down Yveni's jaw. "So why now, sweetness? You're a feast for a starving man all right, but I'm not starving. I don't need you to give me anything beyond what you have."

"I want you to take me."

"Why?"

"Because...it must be wonderful if all those pretty boys were so angry with me for stealing you away, and they came back for more. I want to be with you."

"Even if it's only until you return to Sardelsa?"

"I don't want to be a virgin until I'm twenty-one. I want you to be my first."

Paole raised his eyebrows. "Been giving this some thought, haven't you?" Yveni nodded, not trusting his voice. Paole edged forward and cupped his cheek. "What about all that stuff about sex only being for married people in love?"

He bit his lip. "I might never marry. And...kissing you, holding you, makes me feel...so close and warm. Maybe...sex would help us be even closer."

"Ah, sweetness, I don't think it works like that. Might be better for you to wait until you're in love before you throw yourself at someone."

"You don't want me?" Yveni tugged the sheet around his waist, feeling like a prize fool.

"Are you mad? Of course I want you. Feel." He took Yveni's hand and placed it over his groin. Yveni flushed hot but yes, there was proof indisputable of Paole's admiration. "With someone who thought of sex

more casually, I'd not have waited this long to press my suit." He lifted Yveni's hand and brought it to his lips. "Keep your virginity for the one you plan to marry. Or at least the one you love. That way, you'll have no cause to regret it."

"But I really like you, and care for you. Isn't that enough?"

"With anyone else, yes. Sweetness, you could wear me down easily enough. It'd take very little to persuade me. I'm only human, and you're about as beautiful a boy as I've ever seen. But I'm not the love of your life, and that matters to you."

You could be, Yveni wanted to say. But even as pride demanded he argue against this, he couldn't deny the sense of relief that swept through him.

Paole noticed it too. He smiled a little and stroked Yveni's cheek. "Let's go to sleep. Hold me and kiss me, and I'll pretend that I feel perfectly happy about being so noble and self-sacrificing, and that I don't want to fling you down and have my way with you."

"You d-do?"

"If you could see yourself, lad, you'd know I'm speaking the bare truth. Move over."

Paole stripped to his loincloth, lowered the lamp and climbed into bed. The slide of warm skin against skin sent tingles all through Yveni, and his cock filled once more as he plastered himself against Paole's firm, strong body.

"Ah, lad, you make it hard to be virtuous."

"Then don't be."

"Now don't tempt me, Yveni. I'd say we should sleep apart, but I'm not *that* virtuous."

"No, please don't." He'd become addicted to being held and kissed, and if anyone wanted to condemn that as wrong, there was a limit to what he'd sacrifice for his future bride. Not that he even *wanted* a bride, but a duc needed heirs, and Paole, magnificent as he was, couldn't provide those.

"Sleep," Paole rumbled, kissing his forehead.

Yveni snuggled down, but he doubted he would sleep soon. *He* wasn't that virtuous either.

Fortunately for Paole's self-control, Yveni didn't continue to sleep naked, but they both spent a lot of time off on their own after that. If Paole was anything to go by, Yveni used the privacy to deal with inconvenient desires by jerking off. It wouldn't kill them. He'd lasted many years with only the comfort of his right hand, and could last many more. But that they were both willing and attractive, and still having to acquaint themselves with Mistress Palm and her five daughters, was the height of irony.

Other matters were more easily dealt with. He had Yveni's manumission and false documents countersigned by the magistrate, who wasn't at all surprised that Paole had bought and almost immediately freed a Uemirian slave, or that he planned to return to the land of his birth. "Thought you'd leave last year, Master Paole. There's nothing to stop you."

Paole smiled politely. "So I've come to realise, Your Worship. Thank you."

Jurgen offered a neat solution to the problem of Peni and the cabin. "I bred her, and I don't want her ending up in a knacker's yard. Sell her to me along with your cabin, and I'll give you a fine young gelding who'll pull you all the way to Horches without any difficulty."

Paole and Jurgen agreed a fair price for land, cabin and contents, with Paole arranging to bring Peni in as they were ready to leave and switch her for the new horse. He'd still miss her, but he couldn't have wished for her to have a better home than with the blacksmith. The man appreciated good horseflesh and never mistreated his animals. She'd have a long and happy retirement, as she deserved.

Only Sheriff Rolf was determined to cause any unpleasantness as he accosted them outside the courthouse, scrutinising Yveni with insulting care and making salacious comments. Yveni, who pretended only to speak Uemi while he was in Dadel, stared blankly at the man as he cast aspersions on his supposed breeding and habits. Paole let it go on for long enough to let Rolf get it out of his poisoned system, then stepped in. "My business is no longer yours, Sheriff. Be so kind as to let us be on our way."

"Gladly. See you don't return, boy."

"Whether I do or I don't isn't up to you, *boy*. You have no powers to exclude a law-abiding resident."

"You're only a Uemirien!"

"Aye, and free as you. Now get out of my way. You offend me."

Rolf drew breath to utter more abuse, but just then the magistrate came out of his courthouse. "Oh, Master Paole, you left your will behind."

Paole stepped around the sheriff and took the papers from the magistrate's hand. "Thank you, Your Worship."

"Any time. And let me say that while I understand why you're leaving, your departure leaves us poorer. I wish you well on your journey home."

"Thank you, sir. I wish you well too."

The magistrate clapped him on the shoulder. "Tell your boy he's lucky he had you as a master. Goodbye."

With the magistrate watching him walk away, Sheriff Rolf could only impotently clench his fists and hold his tongue. Paole ignored him completely as he headed back to the cart.

"What the hell is his problem?" Yveni muttered as they mounted up.

"Penile insufficiency, Mathias used to say." Rolf had weak blood vessels in his brain. The man would be dead in a year, and no loss to anyone that Paole could see.

"Not surprising you want to leave."

Paole didn't, particularly, but now he'd decided to go, the departure caused him very little anguish. His ties here were cut, and the only thing left to see was if he could remake them in a country he hadn't seen in twenty-four years.

Chapter Twenty-One

The journey to Horches took three months, and was such an easy drive that Yveni said more than once it surely meant the gods smiled on Paole's decision to return. Paole didn't credit such things, but even the new gelding—a fine and powerful animal called Denil, of Peni's lineage and with her sweet nature—and the refurbishment of the wagon's springs and wheels didn't entirely explain how smoothly the trip had gone.

The few people they met on their way—tribal clans, the odd farmer and herder—accepted Paole unquestioningly and rejoiced at his return. He met families who'd lost children to the slavers, and Yveni carefully noted all the details while Paole mourned with the parents and siblings. He could offer them little comfort, but Yveni said he would use the information he'd gathered if he could. Paole didn't have much hope they could reunite the children with their parents, but he couldn't see any harm in trying.

Yveni once again travelled under the Gaelin identity. The closer they came to Horches, the more irritable and worried he became. Paole forgave him most of the bad temper, because so much was at stake for the lad. If he couldn't connect with this Ferdi or convince him to help, then there was little hope of Yveni ever returning to *his* home or winning the throne. The prospect wasn't a disaster so far as Paole was concerned, but then he wasn't Yveni.

Horches, the oldest city on the planet, so Yveni told him, had been settled more than a hundred years before anywhere else, and by colonists from the Old Home of a different group from those who finally populated Karvis and Tuelwetin. "They say that's why your people have the gifts, and we don't."

"But we're all human. Why such a difference?"

"I don't know. We've lost so many records, and it was a very long time ago."

It was only a matter of curiosity to Paole, but the age of the city and its surroundings was real and present. There were other cities in Uemire but none of this size, Yveni said, and none that sprawled so widely. Paole stared with fascination at the low brick and timber buildings, the people in their colourful tunics, and the sight of so many blond heads, standing proud and tall in their own land. His heart felt full, yet lighter than it had been in a long while—a heady, joyful sensation that took years from his shoulders and shadows from his soul. He was home as he'd never known before, and now knew he had been right to come back.

They had to go to the central market in Horches, for only there would they be able to find the cousin of Yveni's friend. Paole stabled the wagon and Denil, and they set out on foot through the winding, busy

streets. The distinct smells of ocean and river were everywhere in Horches. A huge, ancient fort on the shore—now, Yveni told him, the seat of government and home to the six governors—dominated the city and defended it with huge cannons facing out over the water. To the south of the fort lay the channel of the Yumel river, into which ships sailed with their cargo and passengers, and left bearing spices, cloth and live kardips to foreign lands. The huge sandstone square behind the fort bustled with all the activity of a busy, colourful market and wandering traders. Paole had seen many markets over the years but this was the loudest and brightest of all, and made his heart glad, for this was *his*, and his people walked the streets. Unfamiliar sounds—bells, whistles, bird calls, long sung calls from the street traders—and the odours of spice and craftwork assailed him, yet he recognised something in them. Unfamiliar but not foreign. An odd sensation, but not unpleasant. Here, he was no longer a stranger.

The man they sought was well known, and they were readily directed to premises in a wide lane off the main square. To Paole's unpractised eye, the building was luxurious, with silky curtains at the windows and elegant carvings on the window lintels. He smoothed down his shirt and wished he'd changed it before they'd left the wagon.

Yveni pushed open the ornate glass and wooden door, and entered the cool interior. Paole had an immediate impression of polished stone and wood, and thick, intricately patterned rugs on the floors muffling the street sounds. It spoke of business more than residence, with a desk and wooden cabinets set where a receptionist might be, though there was no one there for the moment.

They'd not taken two steps inside the premises when he heard the sound of running feet and a girl's voice shouting, "Yveni!"

"Yveni!"

Yveni froze. Who the hell...?

"Raina!" He swept her up into his arms and swung her around. "By all the gods! What are you doing here? Is your family here? It's so good to see you!" She looked sleek, dressed in a conservative black suit and soft leather shoes, her hair neatly braided and coiled on the top of her head. Anyone less like a kardip herder, he could hardly imagine.

"Me too. I have so much to tell you. Does Ferdi know you're here? And who's this?"

He turned and put his hand on Paole's arm. "Oh. Raina, meet my friend, Paole. Paole, I told you about Raina, remember."

"Of course. Delighted to meet you, miss."

Paole bowed low and Raina giggled. "Gosh, he's nice. Oh, I need to tell Ferdi. You're in for a surprise or two, my lad."

She ducked out through a door at the side, leaving them in the elegant foyer. No one sat at the reception desk. Was this where Ferdi did his business? But they'd been told it was his house.

For now he had other things to worry about. “How the hell did she get to Horches, and to here? I wasn’t expecting this at all.”

“I can tell,” Paole said dryly. “But it’s good news.”

“The best. I’d been so worried about her. But where’s she—?”

“Your Grace. Greetings.”

They turned at the words. Yveni found a strangely familiar man going to one knee, head bowed. Could it really be... “Gil?”

His old friend grinned and stood as Yveni barrelled into him. “Gil! What...? Why is everyone here? Is Sofia here? What about your sons?”

“Peace, Your Grace. There’s a good deal of news and plenty of time to tell it. Sofia saw you coming. We’ve been on tenterhooks for days.”

Yveni kept his arm around him as he turned to Paole. “Gil, meet Paole. This is wonderful. I was afraid I’d never see you again. Paole—my dearest, oldest friend, Gil.”

Gil bowed. “Pleased to meet you, sir. I think you have much news to tell us too, Yveni.”

“Oh, so much. Where did Raina go? You know her? How did she get here? What are you doing here?”

Gil laughed and held up his hands. “Slow down, lad. Come upstairs so we can have some privacy. I hope you’ve had the sense to keep your identity quiet.”

“Of course I have. Tell me what’s happening back home.”

“In good time. You and your friend could do with tea and a chance to wash, I think.”

Paole was happy to let Yveni’s friend lead them where he wished. The boy vibrated with excitement and happiness, but Paole couldn’t help wondering if bad news explained all these joyful reunions.

Gil took them to a small washroom on the upper floor, and a young servant brought hot water and clean towels. Yveni babbled happily about how good it was to see Gil and Raina again while Paole washed his face and hands and kept his counsel, but that wasn’t good enough for his companion.

“Aren’t you happy for me?” Yveni demanded, hands on hips.

Paole pulled him into a hug and kissed him. “Yes, sweetness, I am. I’m a little overwhelmed, that’s all.”

“Oh. Yes, I understand.”

Paole grabbed a damp cloth and without letting Yveni go, wiped his face, bringing wrath upon his own head.

“Let me *go*, you great oaf!”

Paole grinned. “Anything you say, your gracefulness.”

“Horrid, horrid man,” Yveni muttered as he took the cloth and finished the job.

The servant had waited for them and took them to a room down the hall. Yveni dashed in as the door opened and ran straight into the arms of a motherly, dark-haired Uemirien woman—the sainted Sofia, Paole guessed, and Yveni confirmed it.

Gil and Raina were present, as well as a richly dressed, older man. The man rose. “Greetings, sir. I’m Ferdi of Horches.”

Paole bowed. “Paole of...er...well, I don’t know.”

Ferdi raised his eyebrows in surprise.

“Sir, he’s a returning abducted slave,” Yveni explained. “I’m Yveni of Sardelsa.”

“Yes, I worked that out.” Ferdi grinned. “Greetings, Your Grace, and welcome to my home and this city. Your safe arrival has been anticipated for a little while, and been a great relief to everyone.”

“Thank you. So what’s going on? Gil? You first.”

Gil nodded. Yveni and the others took their seats on thickly padded chairs, covered with delicately woven green cloth. Paole guessed from the quality and beauty of all the textiles—the rugs, curtains and cushions—that this Ferdi appreciated good cloth and possibly traded in it. That would make sense, since cloth was a major product of Horches. Even Karvis valued Uemirien material.

Ferdi signalled to a servant to serve tea as Gil began to speak. “Konsatin threw all the Uemiriens off the duchy staff, and though we weren’t formally exiled, made it clear none of us were welcome in the duchy.”

“He what? Why?”

“Part of a plan to denigrate your father’s memory because he was so kind to our people. Serina’s furious but she’s been gagged. Olana’s accompanied wherever she goes by one of his appointees, and Serina never leaves the private rooms.”

“Is she ill? Has he hurt her?”

Gil held up his hand. “She’s not ill but she’s put it about that she is, with Doctor Kardwil’s complicity. Konsatin pressed for a dispensation to wed her earlier than her seventeenth birthday, but Kardwil has declared she’s mentally and physically too frail for the ‘rigours of wedlock’ as he put it.” Gil’s wife grinned and even Yveni smiled a little. “So far as I know—and I know too little since I’ve been here six months—the plan is to keep up the pretence until you return. She won’t consent to your being declared dead early, and without that, Konsatin can do nothing.”

“But he can do plenty of other things,” Sofia said. “He has half the cabinet in personal debt to him, and his brother sent troops to ‘bolster defence’, though against what, no one’s sure.”

“Why isn’t anyone fighting him?” Yveni cried. “And what’s this about my father?”

Gil answered. “At every chance, Konsatin speaks of how ill-prepared you were to rule, and how negligent your father had been in not ensuring a regent had been planned—”

“Lord Fairn *died*. It wasn’t Father’s fault that he hadn’t had time to select a replacement before he had the stroke.”

“Yes, lad, we know. But tell a lie often enough and some fool will believe it. He’s been fairly subtle. Removing the Uemiriens was the most overt thing he did and I’m afraid he used your disappearance as the excuse. He concocted evidence of a supposed Uemirien plot against you, and that was enough to increase animosity.”

“He also accused Migel of theft and had him dismissed.” Sofia scowled. “Gil stood up for our boy and was thrown out of the castle. We barely had time to collect our personal belongings.”

“I’ll kill him,” Yveni declared. “How *dare* he!”

“Too easily,” Gil said. “Anyway, we judged the mood too hostile to remain in Sardelsa so we returned, only to find young Raina here with the news about Gerd and you. We thought you lost forever.”

“Gerd died bravely. He honoured you to the last.” Yveni and Gil shared a sorrowful look. “I’m sorry he’s dead.”

“So am I. He was a rascal and a thief, but honest in his own way. We grieved for both of you.”

Raina respected the moment of remembrance for all of a second before chipping in with a bright smile. “But you’re alive, Yveni. My turn!”

Ferdi coughed. “Manners, miss. You’ll make me regret taking you in.”

“Sorry. But it’s only him.” Paole grinned behind his hand at her dismissive words. Gil didn’t bother hiding his amusement either. “After that horrible man stole you, my father came looking and found me wandering around in a daze. I told him what had happened and asked if we could look for you. He told me not to be ridiculous, then he tied me up to stop me running after you. I was so *angry*!”

“I bet.” Yveni grinned as widely as the others now. “But how did you—?”

“Well, we reached Grekil, but I managed to put all the potential husbands off.” She fluttered her eyelashes. ““Oh, sir, you don’t want to listen to those stories about the babies born with three eyes. We only had it happen twice. My sister isn’t even that ugly looking once you’re used to it.””

Yveni laughed at her innocent expression. “That’s evil.”

“Oh yes, but only what my father deserved, greedy bastard. Sorry, Sofia.”

Ferdi rolled his eyes. “Not for the first time, I feel a twinge of sympathy for her parents. Go on, miss, and mind your language. We have nobility with us.”

“But Yveni doesn’t count. Anyway, I ran away from Father and snuck in amongst a group travelling west to Horches. When the caravaners found me, I told them I knew how to physick kardips and horses and any other animal, so they let me stay. I remembered all you told me about Ferdi and the letter and the pendant and Gerd, so when I reached here, I came to him and asked for help.”

“Which, fool that I was, I gave her. The things I’ve done in your name, cousin Gil.”

"We're in your debt," Gil said gravely, but his hazel eyes twinkled. He seemed a man who smiled a good deal, the reason for Yveni's abiding affection clear enough. Paole stepped on a twinge of jealousy. The man had raised Yveni. It was only natural they should be close.

"That reminds me." Yveni undid his belt and extracted the pendant and letter that he'd shown Paole only two days ago. "You can have this back." He handed the pretty necklace over to Sofia.

"Thank you, dear. I was sorry this had been lost, though we mourned you somewhat more."

"Somewhat." Gil patted her hand. "Your turn, Yveni."

Yveni gave them an abbreviated description of events, skirting right over the quarrels and misunderstandings, only saying that Paole had freed him and that Yveni had put it to him to come to Horches. As he spoke, Gil watched Paole with a calm but speculative eye. Paole imagined the questions the man wanted to ask and only hoped he'd be given time to settle in before he had to answer them.

"Do you think it's possible we could find his family?" Yveni asked when he'd finished his tale.

Ferdi rubbed his chin. "The governors have collected names of the stolen children for some time and have made representations several times to the Karvin king. To no avail, sadly, but we keep trying. Paole, your name may be on the list, but where your clan might be is a different matter."

"It's not important immediately, sir. I'd long ago given up hope."

"We do things differently in Uemire," Ferdi told him. "We never give up on family. But tell me, what are your plans?"

"I hoped to set up a practice here, or even train as a healer. I have gold—I removed all my savings before we crossed the border. Finding somewhere to stay is the first need."

"Here." Ferdi tapped the table for emphasis. "Both of you, I insist, even if I have to kick Raina onto the roof."

"Master Ferdi!"

Gil laughed as Ferdi gazed serenely at his troublesome charge. "As for the rest, I can help. But you're my honoured guests for as long as you wish it. Your Grace, you should remain incognito. There are one or two Karvi here in the city, more Tuelers, and we have no idea who is watching what or telling what tales."

Yveni glanced at Paole before saying, "I understand. But I should reveal myself to the governors."

"Agreed. I'll arrange a meeting. Sofia, my dear, you've set up a room. Would you care to show our guests where they can lay their packs? Master Paole, I'll have your wagon and horse brought to my own stables, with your permission."

"Anything you like, sir. Thank you."

Yveni grinned at Paole. "Told you everything would be fine. You worried all that time for nothing."

Raina came over to Yveni and grabbed his hand. "Come on, I know where you're to be put."

"Raina, dear, be patient with the poor lad," Sofia said. "He's come a long way."

“But not today. Come on.”

Gil glanced at Yveni and cleared his throat. “Paole, if you’re not too tired, perhaps you and I could sort out the stabling of your mount.”

“Go on, Paole. I’ll put your pack away. Better that only one of us has to deal with Raina at a time.” Yveni smirked as she whacked him on the arm, much to Ferdi’s horror. “The husbands in Grekil had a lucky escape, I think.”

Sofia freed Yveni from Raina’s possessive grip and took his arm instead. “This way, dear.”

Yveni left Paole with Gil. He hoped the two would get on. He couldn’t see any reason why they wouldn’t.

“When my Sight picked you up, I thought there was something wrong with it,” Sofia confided as they walked down the corridor. “Gil actually cried with joy.”

“Really?”

“Oh yes. He blamed himself, you know. For your supposed death and Gerd’s. He took it hard.”

Yveni nodded. Talking about it had brought the memories back, and the guilt.

They went up another flight of stairs, and Raina, ahead of them, flung open a door. “Your palace, Your Majesty.”

It wasn’t much like the palace, but Yveni had no complaints about the lovely room with thick, bright rugs on the wooden floor and heavy curtains to keep out the summer sun and the winter cold. The room had two good-sized beds. Raina sat on one and gave Yveni a mischievous smile. “I told Sofia that maybe you’d only need the one between the two of you. She wouldn’t believe me, but Master Paole is *very* good-looking, isn’t he?”

Sofia pursed her lips. “Raina, that’s rather tasteless. You shouldn’t presume about relationships based on so little observation.” Raina ducked her head at the reprimand. She, like Yveni, could tell when one was seriously meant.

Yveni didn’t know what to say. Paole and he weren’t lovers, but they were more than just friends. He had no idea how to explain it and he certainly didn’t want to do that right now.

“The beds are fine, Raina. The room’s fine, thank you. Sofia, you and Gil live here too?”

“Yes. The boys are working and living in the city, but Ferdi, by chance, had a need for a housekeeper and a stableman, so he offered us rooms in the servant quarters downstairs. We could live with Migel but Gil and Ferdi are great friends now, and it’s a fine house. His wife died last year, so he likes the company. He has no children, but Raina fills that lack.” Raina screwed up her nose, but Yveni had no reason to doubt it.

“I thought you wanted to train as a healer, Raina. Wasn’t that the reason you didn’t want to marry?”

“I *am* training. But I also help in his business. Tell me about Paole. He’s a healer too? Does he want a partner?”

Sofia told her off for being forward again, but Yveni was happy to talk about Paole and his plans. Nothing would please him more than to see his friends all well settled and happy. A more cheerful thing to dwell on, certainly, than what that bastard Konsatin was doing to Sardelsa while Yveni cooled his heels thousands of kilometres away. He wanted to learn about the situation there, but Gil's information was out of date. Perhaps the governors of the city would know more. He ached to return and claim what was his, and rescue his sisters from Konsatin's clutches. There had to be a way.

"This way. It's quicker than fighting through the square."

Paole followed Gil through the back lanes and narrow streets of the city. Kivnic was the largest place he'd ever visited and it was nothing compared to this. "I'll be lost if I have to walk around here on my own."

"You get used to it surprisingly fast. I can't say I enjoy city living particularly, but Ferdi's been very kind to me and mine. I've been lucky in my friends. So has Yveni," he added, shooting a shrewd glance Paole's way. "If anyone else had bought him from that market..."

"Oh, the brat...er..."

Gil's lips twitched. "Go on."

"He'd have escaped eventually."

"Aye, but you kept him safe, for which I thank you. He and his sisters are as precious to my wife and me as our own sons are. I owe you."

Paole couldn't help but warm to this man, his affection for Yveni only one of the reasons to like him. "I owe him, so there's no debt. You have sons?"

"Four, all grown. All employed too, thankfully, and settling in. They're like you. They don't know Uemire at all, but they've been accepted. They miss Sardelsa more than we do, but there's no helping that."

"I don't miss Karvis. Your sons weren't enslaved, at least."

"No. On that you have my sympathies. I hope we can find your family."

Paole honestly didn't believe it would ever happen and had pinned no hopes on the prospect. All he wanted was to start a new life where he could walk tall and not be the eternal outsider.

They reached the stables. The sight of the gaily painted wagon took Gil aback. "Oh. You actually brought your shop with you. Where did you learn the craft?"

Paole explained. "Though mostly my patients seek my Healing Sight."

"Yveni forgot to mention that. Did he tell you about Raina?"

"Yes. He has a knack for finding those of us with the gift, apparently."

Gil laughed. "So it seems. Let's look at your horse."

He thought Denil a very fine animal. He ran his hands down the powerful legs and lifted each hoof to examine it. "Say what you like about the Karvi, they know their horses."

“And they treat them better than they do their slaves, though that’s not saying much. He’s in good health. I saw he had a slight inflammation in a back leg tendon, but we rested him for two days and he was fine.”

“Handy gift.”

“It has its moments.”

Paole wanted to pay the stable master for his trouble, but Gil insisted it should be at Ferdi’s expense, by Ferdi’s explicit command. Not wanting to offend, Paole didn’t argue, and let Gil drive since the wagon complicated the route back to Ferdi’s stables.

For a man who apparently lived alone apart from friends and servants, Ferdi had sizeable accommodation for horses. No kardips that he could see, and most of the stalls were empty, though two handsome workhorses poked their noses curiously out at the newcomer. Gil stored the wagon in the barn and set Denil up in his own well-appointed stall. Gil spent a good bit of time talking to him and making friends with him. Denil didn’t mind who fed him treats or scratched between his ears, and whinnied softly in approval as Gil courted him.

“Losing your position must have been hard,” Paole ventured as Gil washed his hands afterwards.

“Oh well. I had no stomach for the regent or his men, so I was glad to leave on that score. Leaving the lad’s sisters there without supporters was what I really minded.”

He shook his hands dry and faced Paole. “You realise Yveni must return to Sardelsa. The duchy needs him to restore what’s being destroyed and to carry on his father’s good work.”

“I’m fully aware of that. The boy must do what he wants. I only agreed to carry him this far.”

“So...it was just a matter of convenience for you? Travelling companions?”

“Whether it was or not, sir, Yveni’s made it completely clear where his destiny lies—to take up the throne, to marry and bear heirs. I have no role to play in any of that. Our paths crossed by chance, and now must diverge again.”

“Maybe so. But I tell you this. Yveni has his faults, though he’s always been mature for his age, and it’s pleasing to see him becoming a sensible man. But one thing he had in abundance—loyalty. He would never abandon a friend or forget a debt.”

“There is no debt,” Paole said firmly. “He saved my life, I brought him here. He goes where he wills.”

“I only mean to say that even if he does, you won’t be abandoned, Paole. Uemire won’t lose you twice.”

The sudden rush of anger he felt, surprised him. “Never lifted a hand to find me before, though, and I returned only because my old master gave me the wherewithal, not because of anything Uemire did for me.” Gil stared steadily at him, betraying no reaction, and Paole, realising how pointless and rude it was to bring all this up to him, fought to bring his temper under control. “Your support and kind words are

welcome, friend Gil. But I'm not fool enough to think I'll make my way by anything but my own two hands and my brain. I make no claim on Yveni. None at all."

Gil shook his head. "We talk at cross purposes but I won't push it. Come inside. My wife predicted you two would be hungry, and who am I to argue with one who has the Sight?"

"I can't believe how well this has turned out." Yveni flung himself on the far bed and kicked off his boots. "Ferdi's such a nice man, and so generous. All Gil's family seem to be nice."

Paole hung up his jerkin on a clotheshorse and answered with his back to Yveni. "They're very hospitable, certainly. They honour you a great deal."

"And you. With Ferdi's help, you and Raina can really set yourselves up. Can't wait to see you do well, Paole. You deserve it, and I'm glad to see Raina achieve her dream. She really hated being stuck in her village. I'll do anything I can to help you both."

"You should be concentrating on your own dreams, boy." Yveni pursed his lips at Paole using a term he knew perfectly well annoyed him. "Time you stopped worrying about other people and their prospects and hurried up with getting home and sorting out that mess."

Yveni rolled over to look at his friend, slowly undressing still with his back to him. "Well, I will, but there are a lot of things to take into account. I can't just board a ship and charge back."

"So, do what you need to. Leave Raina and me to deal with our own affairs. You have a different path to follow. Get on with it."

"Yes, sir, master lord Paole. What's got into you?"

"Nothing. I think you forget that this is all temporary."

"I forget nothing. I don't see any harm in wanting to help those who've helped me. I owe you and Raina a good deal." Paole didn't answer. "Oh, don't be so grumpy. Which bed shall we sleep on?"

Paole turned. "I'll take this one, and you'll take that one, Your Grace. That's something else to put aside now you're here."

"Why? What harm does it do?"

"Your reputation for one thing. You said yourself that your people look badly on those who sleep around outside marriage, and since you can't marry someone like me, it's better that you stop it right now. You're with people you'll need to support you. People who may even be your subjects one day. You have to start acting like a duc and behaving responsibly."

"But we're not *doing* anything."

"No. Not yet, and not ever, so it seems. What if a servant walks in and we're wrapped around each other? Word will get around and before you know it, everyone will know the Vicont Yveni has a male lover."

Yveni stared at Paole, unable to believe his ears. “Why didn’t you mention this while we were travelling?”

“Saw no need to. We didn’t know what we’d find when we got here, where we’d be staying, or any of it. Now I know the reality. You’re not a private citizen any longer. You’re the heir to the ducal throne and I’m just an ex-slave from another country. Our future paths won’t cross.”

“Yes, they will.”

“How?”

Yveni stopped, undone by that one word. “I’ll...I mean...I can...you said you’d train in Sardelsa!”

“No, *you* said that. There’s a perfectly good university here, and people who look like me and don’t scorn me. Sardelsa threw out all my kind, remember? Even if you return, you think I want to live among those who let that happen?”

He had a point and Yveni hated it. “But...I want us to be friends, Paole.”

“We are. We will be. But not lovers. And when you go home, I won’t be with you. Fact of life, Your Grace.”

“Stop calling me that.”

“Get used to it. Even Gil won’t be able to call you by name in public once you’re duc. That’s your destiny. Accept it or leave it to Konsatin. Now, is that bed acceptable or do you want to swap?”

“I want you in whichever one I choose.”

Paole shook his head. “Sorry. It’s over.”

“Paole, please.”

“Yveni, leave me be or I’ll find Sofia and ask for another room. I mean what I say. It’s unfair of you to keep pushing.”

Yveni shut his mouth, but his heart ached. He *wanted* Paole with him. Needed him. Maybe if he’d pushed matters all those months ago at the cabin, Paole wouldn’t be...

But though Yveni hated it, Paole spoke the truth. If he built an immoral reputation, it would be one more weapon Konsatin could use against him. Paole being male mattered less than him being Uemirien, but neither fact would go down well with a population already primed to think him foolish and flighty.

Paole lay down on his chosen bed. “Douse the light when you’re ready,” he muttered.

Yveni slipped off his bed and crept across the gap between them. “Boy, I told you—”

Yveni bent and kissed his forehead. “Don’t think you’ll escape my heart so easily, Master Paole, whatever must happen.”

Paole’s expression softened. “Nor mine, sweetness. Go to bed, and don’t waste time maundering.”

He may as well bid Yveni to stop breathing. Others had sacrificed their lives and livelihoods to send him to a safe haven. He had a duty not to squander that by making himself an unappealing alternative to the current regent.

Ann Somerville

But no force on earth could stop him regretting the necessity.

Chapter Twenty-Two

“The new shop looks very professional, don’t you think?” Gil paused as he asked the horse he was working with to lift a hind hoof. “Raina did a lovely job with the lettering over the door.”

“It all seems fine to me. I wish them well.” To tell the truth, Yveni’d had a month of listening to Raina chatter about the shop Ferdi had let to her and Paole, and all the fitting out. He was a little sick of it.

“You sound less than enthusiastic.”

Yveni roused himself. “No, I am. I’m sure they’ll make a great success. Paole could have made a fortune if he’d stayed in Karvis. He’s wonderful with patients, especially the elderly. He never gives them the impression they’re wasting his time even when there’s nothing wrong with them but the want of a bit of company.”

“A knack our miss might have to learn, I suspect. Easy, boy.” He used the pick to dig the irritating stone out of the huge hoof. “Though she might find the theoretical study easier than him.”

“Paole’s clever, and he’s already read so many medical texts. It’s not his fault he was kept as a slave so long.”

Gil stopped and looked up at him. “Peace, lad. I meant no insult. Raina’s a little younger, that’s all, and she reads Uemi somewhat more readily. Master Paole’s a very intelligent man. I know that.”

“Uh, yes.” Yveni had made a bit of a fool of himself. “Of course.”

“Are you all right, Yveni? I know the meeting with the governors was disappointing but you’ve been out of sorts for a while now.”

“Have I? Sorry. I’m upset about what’s happening back home, that’s all. I’d hoped the governors could offer more help, but I didn’t expect much.”

“No. Even if they had a standing army, taking on a member of the Unity would be something even Karvis would hesitate to do. Uemire’s a poor country, and thinly populated.”

“Yes. I know all that, Gil.”

“I’m sure.” Gil extracted the stone and dirt from the horse’s hoof, and patted the huge haunch when the animal whickered a little in distress. “Now that didn’t hurt, so don’t pretend it did. You’re a big old softie, aren’t you?”

Yveni smiled. He loved watching Gil with horses. Sofia often said he had to be part equine, he had such a feel for them.

“So...you’re happy Paole’s moved out then?”

Yveni blinked. "What?"

"That he's set up his own place. You must be happy for him."

"Uh, yes. I mean, not that he's moved out, but that he's doing so well."

"You probably miss his company, though. You've been together for so long, I mean."

Yveni looked narrowly at his friend's apparently innocent expression. Gil only possessed the Vision, but Yveni had to wonder if he saw more with those sharp eyes than the physical. "It's not like he's moved across the ocean."

"No. But one day *you* will."

"I'll deal with that when it happens."

"Aye. He's a good friend though. A fine man. The gods brought you together, I feel."

"And the gods will separate us. My future's in Sardelsa."

"And producing heirs."

"Yes. I can't exactly count on Serina doing that, can I?"

"Not with Konsatin, no." The hated name soured Gil's expression for a moment. "There have been childless ducs before, I recall."

"Yes, but with Konsatin and his loathsome brother panting at the gates, our line can't afford not to secure its future. If my father had not had his stroke, I'd be betrothed already." Why the hell was Gil talking about this? He'd never had any interest in Yveni's future wedded bliss before.

"Yes. But you're not."

"Is there a point to this?"

"None, really. Just making conversation while I deal with this handsome gentleman. You best run along. Ferdi gave up Raina with the expectation of you taking her place, so it might be wise to occasionally show your face at his place of business."

Yveni screwed up said face. "I can't imagine how I survived the last year or so without you managing every second of my day, Master Gil. I'm so glad you're here to do it now."

"Take your sarcasm and be off, lad. Some of us have work to do."

Yveni walked away, considering there was, just occasionally, a negative side to being with people who felt so at ease with him. He wished people would stop talking about Paole moving out. It was hard enough dealing with it without being reminded all the time.

Paole found his patient lying on a couch in the servant quarters, damaged foot bandaged and elevated, and the man himself looking rather chagrined. "I'll leave you with him," Sofia said. "He's unbearable when he's injured."

Paole smiled at her as she left, then moved over to the stool next to the couch. "Now what have you done to yourself, Gil?"

The man pulled a face. “Let a damn horse catch me unawares. I haven’t made a misstep like that since I was twenty. I’m getting too old for this.”

“He stood on your foot?”

“Aye, and then I managed to twist it again, tripping on a rope. I made a thorough bugger up of it.”

“Let me look.” Paole used his gift to seek out the damage, exploring the inflammation and crushed blood vessels. “No bones broken, but it’s a bad sprain on top of some heavy bruising. It’ll be a couple of weeks before you’re walking normally, and only if you stay off it, keep it raised and use plenty of cold compresses on it.”

“I know the treatment. I just thought it might be broken. I appreciate you coming over to check. You must be busy.”

“We are, but I just tell my lad to ask people to come back, or take notes. I can give you something for the pain and the bruising. It’ll speed things up a little.”

“Thank you. Can I offer you some tea?”

“No, I’m fine. How is...everyone?” He hadn’t been to Ferdi’s house for over a month, not since they’d opened the shop. Paole told himself he’d been too busy, but it wasn’t strictly true. He’d avoided the house, despite—because of—his fondness for the residents. Or one resident.

“Everyone’s in good health. He’s been a little down in the mouth lately though.”

“Who?”

Gil gave him a look. “Who do you think? Has he been by the shop lately?”

“No, I don’t think so. Not that he needs to. Raina can tell him all he needs to know.”

“I suppose so. Ferdi was saying he’d like you to come to dinner soon. Meet some of his associates, make contacts. Some people in the import trade who can obtain medicines and herbs to order, that kind of thing.”

“That’s kind of him. Yveni would be there?”

“Oh, I think so. Ferdi wants him to make contacts too. Seeing how it’s possible he won’t be able to return to Sardelsa, Yveni may end up having to make his life here.”

Paole straightened up in alarm. “Has something happened? Why won’t he go back?”

Gil made a “settle down” motion with his hand. “Calm yourself, man. Nothing’s happened. The governors weren’t very encouraging, that’s all, and we had some reports from Sardelsa of Konsatin strengthening border controls. Yveni will still try but we’re being realistic.”

“He has to go back. You said it yourself.”

“I did and I meant it. But it could take a lot longer than we hoped. One option is Karvin mercenaries but Yveni utterly refuses to consider them. Not that I blame him, but without that kind of help, it’s hard to imagine how he’ll retake the throne. Once he’s old enough to rule in his own right, it might be easier. Turning up at Nukin Port as the rightful duc, and not just heir, might work. Then again, it might not.”

“Is he upset?”

“He seems to be, but not about that. I wondered if you had any idea what was troubling him.”

Gil had a way of looking at a man that made Paole think he could read his damn mind. “No, I don’t. I haven’t seen or spoken to him in weeks. I suspect it’s this matter that’s on his mind. Perhaps he’s worried about his sisters.”

“Perhaps. Did you want to give me the bruise remedies now or just a script?”

Paole left him with some powders for the pain, a salve for the bruising and firm instructions not only to Gil but to Sofia as well that the man needed to stay off the injured foot as much as possible for the next few days. “Don’t come complaining to me if you end up with a sprain that goes on for months if you don’t do as I say.”

Gil gave him a rueful grin. “I wouldn’t dare. Thanks for coming, Paole. It’s very nice to see you again.”

“Same here. Good day, Sofia.”

He half-hoped and half-feared to run into Yveni in the house, but there was no sign of the boy. Probably for the best. Yveni hadn’t been happy about Paole moving into the little apartment above the shop, but Paole wanted his own place, somewhere he could put the books and his few possessions, and most importantly, stop being tormented by Yveni himself. Not that the lad had done or said anything the least improper. He’d been cheerful and helpful in assisting Paole and Raina set up the herbalist shop. Only his eyes betrayed his real feelings. Paole would rather be stabbed in the heart with a knife than see the pain in them.

The boy would get over it in time. It wasn’t as if they had been lovers in truth. Their relationship had changed, that was all. Moving on was the right thing for both of them.

Paole promised to repeat that advice to himself as often as necessary.

Things grew easier, as almost everything did over time. Paole could hardly avoid Ferdi’s house and business completely, and if he tried, he soon found Raina or Sofia or Gil enquiring if there was a problem. So he didn’t. He encountered Yveni a number of times over the following weeks without there being any unpleasant discussion, and the boy appeared to be resigned to the situation. It helped that Yveni was surrounded by people who cared for him and that Ferdi was determined to involve him as much as he could in the running of his business. Paole wondered why he bothered, because the training would be of little use to Yveni once he left, but it was Ferdi’s business, not his.

As the months passed, though, it looked like Yveni might really have to remain in Uemire. Each new arrival from Sardelsa—a few came with every boat into the port—brought information about the situation, which the governors’ office collected and passed covertly to Yveni. None of it offered any encouragement. Konsatin had firmly entrenched his hold on the country since Yveni’s father had died and Yveni had fled

the duchy. Yveni and Gil believed Konsatin was not yet ready to challenge the Unity between the twenty duchies in Tuelwetin, but it couldn't be ruled out.

The politics held little interest for Paole. He only wanted Yveni to be happy, whether in Horches or in Sardelsa. Selfishly, he hoped the situation would not change, and Yveni would stay in Uemire. For Yveni's sake, he hoped there would be a breakthrough. Whatever happened, he dared not express his feelings for Yveni to anyone. The freedom to do that had long since gone.

"Be with you in a moment, Gil. Just let me finish this... There." Paole looked up from his notes. "How's that mare?"

"Bulging." Gil grinned. "Raina assures me it's not twins but it's going to be the biggest foal I ever saw."

"I'm sure it'll be a fine little horse. What can I do for you?"

"Wanted to pick up some more of the liniment. We're nearly out."

"Couldn't Raina have brought some back with her?"

"She could, but I wanted to stretch my legs, and invite you over to supper tonight with Sofia and me. I could do with a break from talking about infants."

"No longer besotted with your new granddaughter then?"

"She's a darling but sometimes a man wants an evening talking about horses' bowels, not teething babies. Even Jaime wants to escape from time to time and he's the father."

Paole grinned. "I'm sure. Though I imagine once your mare gives birth, Sofia will be around begging me to save her from talk of weaning foals."

"Most likely. Anyway, usual time. Yveni's going out to dinner with Ferdi so he won't be around."

"Ah. Hope he enjoys himself." Paole was never sure if Gil deliberately engineered visits to Ferdi's house mostly when Yveni went out for some reason, but he appreciated it nonetheless. He'd been to supper with him there, but Yveni never appeared to enjoy himself, and Paole hated watching him trying to be cheerful. Easier to avoid the situation completely.

Gil filled in the growing silence after Paole's comment by saying, "Raina's still talking about a second shop, I see."

"Yes. Ferdi's offered us a nice one to rent, but I'd like to give this another year. We're doing well, but expanding...not so sure about it. Maybe when she graduates. I don't need an empire, not like Ferdi. I only want enough to live on, not to bathe in gold coins."

Gil laughed, stroking his chin as he did when he was highly amused. "I don't think that lass would be satisfied until she had a string of healers' premises stretching from here to the Karvin border. I wouldn't want to be the man standing in her way either."

"I won't do that. I'll step aside and let her have her—"

A thunderclap cut him off. No...not thunder. A drum—a group of them—repeating a deafening boom at one-second intervals. “What—?”

A horn wailed a long, mournful note over the insistent slow drumbeat. Gil straightened up, his expression serious. “That’s the summoning from the fort. The governors sound it in emergencies to call the people together. We need to go to the square, now.”

“Let me lock up.”

Out in the lane, anxious-faced men and women streamed past, tugging children in their wake. All headed for the market square, as the ominous drums and horn sounded over and over, deep, chilling noises that reverberated in chest and head.

People filled the square, and the hum and clamour of their worried speculation nearly drowned out that of the summoning. Men shoved, hunting for families. Children cried as their mothers looked for husbands, relatives. All around, the conversations were louder, sharper than usual, tainted by fear. Paole felt its infection as he searched the crowd for Raina’s face, and those of other friends. Sofia and Yveni spotted them first. Sofia called to her husband as Yveni pushed determinedly through the bodies with her following in his wake.

Gil embraced his wife, then held her by her shoulders. “What’s going on?” He had to shout.

“Ships coming. It’s an attack!”

Paole’s eyes found Yveni’s. He had to repress the instinct to take the lad in his arms as Gil had with Sofia. “Who?” he asked her, still looking at the boy.

“We can’t tell. The governors— Look, there they are. They’re going to make an announcement.”

At the front of the fort stood a stone dais from where the governors or the city wardens would make announcements, and occasional entertainments were staged. All six governors and a number of officials now came out of the fort’s main entrance and stood waiting as a bell tolled from the fort’s main tower. It kept up the deafening sound until all in the square were silent. Then the governor at the front of the dais held up his hand, and the bell stopped. The elderly governor spoke into a large cone which meant his voice was clearly audible across the vast crowd.

“People of Horches, the seers have foreseen an attack on this city by a hostile foreign force arriving by ship. We have four days to prepare. All women, children and men over sixty, the infirm and crippled, will be evacuated. Go to your homes, and prepare the minimum you need. Wardens, clear the crowd and report to us for instructions. Those leaving the city, remain at home until you hear the summoning horn. Those remaining will be called at sunset. Everyone, stay calm, obey your wardens. Return to your homes, and wait for instructions.”

A terrified clamour broke out, but now the city wardens in red tabards waved poles with red streamers as they forced their way through the crowd, urging people to disperse. Paole should have gone back to his shop and apartment, but he wanted to be with Yveni and the others. He followed them to Ferdi’s house and

no one questioned his decision. Raina and Ferdi were already there, and as soon as Sofia arrived, Raina pounced on her.

“What’s going on? What do you See?”

Gil eased her back. “Calm down, girl. Ferdi, perhaps we could go upstairs?”

The other household servants joined them, sitting on the floor while Sofia spoke. “There are three ships coming, and hundreds of soldiers.”

“Karvin?” Yveni asked.

“We can’t tell. We’ve only had flashes, you see. I saw the fort being attacked and the town overrun.” She shuddered and Gil reached for her hand. “Many people dying.”

“But who would attack us?” Ferdi murmured. “We’re poor, we’ve been here for hundreds of years. The problems with Helser are long over. The fort has never had any role in defence in my lifetime.”

“Now it will.” Yveni stood. “Paole, you and I will be in the militia. Gil? You and your boys too?”

“Yes, but *Gaelin*...”

Gil, taking Paole’s hint, looked at Ferdi, who clapped his hands at the servants. “I’ll speak to you downstairs. Luisa, you’ll be leaving with Sofia, so you should pack. Manel, Jorje, you lads are just old enough to stay but if you want to leave, no one will think less of you. Go, think on it and help Luisa clear the kitchen and ready the house to be locked down.”

When they’d gone, Gil turned to Yveni. “You need to go with the evacuees. We can’t risk you being lost.”

“No, I’m staying. I won’t be pushed out of danger again while other people fight my battles.”

“Gil’s right, my boy,” Ferdi said. “One lad more or less won’t make a difference, but to lose the heir to the ducal throne would be a tragedy.”

“Then so be it. No. I’m firm on this.”

Gil let out a long-suffering sigh and turned to Paole. “Talk to him.”

Paole thought that a bit rich, but he gave it a try. “Yveni, you’ll put people at risk because they’ll spend time defending you and not their city or themselves. Is that what you want?”

“I’ve asked for no one to do that.”

“And yet they will. Gil will, I will.”

Yveni clenched his fists. “Sofia, do you foreSee danger to me personally?”

She shook her head. “It’s not that specific. Closer to the time, it will be, but by then, you should have gone. Please, Yveni.”

“I’m sorry, but I refuse. I absolutely forbid anyone to put themselves in harm’s way on my account, though.”

“Sure, that’ll work,” Paole muttered. He wanted to spank the boy. “Ferdie, you should go.”

“No, I’m staying. This is my home, my city. If it burns around me, I’d rather that than return to nothing.”

Gil rolled his eyes extravagantly and appealed to Sofia. “Will common sense breakout soon, do you foreSee, wife?”

“No, husband, I fear not. I have to go. I’ll need to look after the daughters-in-law and the grandchildren. I leave our boys in your hands.” Gil kissed her hand, and they shared a moment between them, before she straightened. “I’d best get ready. Yveni, for the last time, please reconsider.”

He went to her and kissed her cheek. “I can’t. Forgive me?”

She sighed and patted his face. “I expected no different, though I hoped for it. Paole, Gil...if you take any stupid risks and get yourselves killed, I’ll curse you into your graves. And Yveni...remember you have sisters who love you.”

“I do. But today, I’m only one of many brothers who must stay and fight.”

They hugged, then he let her go.

“If he’s staying, then I’m staying,” Raina declared.

“Oh no you won’t, missy,” Ferdi said. “If I have to have you tied up and carried, you’re going.”

“Raina, the evacuees will need healers,” Paole said. “Pack your personal things, and then you and I will go back to the shop and pack supplies. You won’t be useless, I know that.”

“He’s right,” Gil said. “There’ll be infants and infirm people, and others need help. You have to go.”

“All right. But Yveni—”

“Is staying,” Yveni declared. “I can be more use here.”

“As you wish.” Gil sighed and turned to his wife. “I’ll come to you, love.”

Sofia and Raina left them to prepare. “What happens now?” Yveni asked Ferdi.

“No idea, my boy. The governors won’t be happy you’re here. You’ll make a handsome hostage if anyone realises who you are, so you best lay low.”

“I don’t know how many men in the city have weapons training, but I do, and Yveni knows bow and sword,” Gil said. “We should tell the wardens.”

“And I know how to make explosives,” Paole said. Every eye in the room turned on him. “Um...a hobby of mine.” It had been something to pass the long winter months with Mathias, and then on his own. He never thought it would have any practical use beyond removing old tree stumps from Mathias’s land.

“Then we better tell the wardens that too. Ferdi? What do you know?”

“How to make money. But if any soldier comes at me, I’ll throw coins at him.”

Paole smiled. “Might work. But you should go. The evacuees will need those with heart and brain to guide them.”

“With women like Sofia and Raina with them, they’ll have that. No, here I stay. I may not be able to fight, but I can organise rations and weapons. They need hearts and brains here too.”

“So they do,” Gil said. “Yveni, for the sake of your father’s memory and your sisters, please, stay out of trouble.”

Paole lifted an eyebrow. “With his history?”

Yveni burst out laughing. “He does have a point. I’ll be good, I promise.”

“Then we should help the others pack, and put together what we have that might be of use. Paole, will you return to your shop?”

“When Raina does, but with Ferdi’s permission, I’ll set up my base here for now.”

“You’re always welcome, my dear fellow. Well, let’s move, gentlemen.”

The wardens pressed every cart, wagon and capable horse into service to carry evacuees and supplies out of the city, as well as gold and other precious items. Raina loaded up Paole’s wagon with medical supplies and food, and still had room for Sofia’s youngest daughter-in-law and her babe in arms. The plan was to send people towards Gerfim, a hundred or so miles southeast of Horches. If the city fell, the evacuees would be on their own, but it was the best they could be offered. Remaining in the city might be a death sentence.

The warden for the sector in which Ferdi’s house stood did his best to argue the old man into leaving, but had no luck. Given his prominent status, the warden made no attempt to force him, and Ferdi, like the other men, bade a sad farewell to the thousands of people setting out on a journey from which they might not return. Sofia never shed a tear as she prepared to climb up into the driving seat of the wagon, but Gil was red-eyed as he hugged her and let her go, and so were her sons. Paole felt glad that he had responsibility only for himself, because to send away those he loved in this manner would be more than he could bear.

Raina sobbed as she kissed Yveni and Paole, and made them promise to be careful. Sofia tugged her arm and bade her come along.

“Be strong,” Sofia called as she flicked the reins.

“Be careful,” Gil yelled back.

“Paole, don’t hire another healer!”

Paole grinned and assured Raina he would not. He kept up the smile until the wagon turned the corner.

The city felt strangely quiet with the loss of more than half its population, and those remaining, sad and anxious about their loved ones. Nothing more would happen that evening, but at first light, Gil and Yveni would join the other fit men and youths in the square and take charge of drills since there were very few in the city with any weapons experience at all. Gil’s sons, for now going back to their own homes, would be among those who had that training. The governors had gratefully accepted Paole’s offer of making bombs, and a workshop had been set up at his disposal near the city armoury. The wardens asked

the men to disperse, to rest and ready themselves for the morrow. Each household had been asked to supply whatever could be used as a weapon, whether as missiles or in hand to hand. Food was to be pooled, water rationed.

Despite it all, the city could be annihilated.

But Paole felt strangely calm, because it was his choice to stay and fight. His to fight and die. He would be a free man, in his own country, defending his own property. And he'd be fighting alongside true friends, who'd give everything they had in defence of their home and those they loved. He'd prefer not to die at all, not yet. But he'd die free. It made a difference.

Yveni put himself in charge of cooking. Paole sat down in the kitchen to work on his notes for bombs and other distractions, while Yveni worked his magic with vegetables and meat, and Gil went out to check on his heavily pregnant mare and the security of the yard. He was back in minutes. "Uh, Paole, I think you'd better come out. Luna's in labour."

Paole set his pencil down and shuffled his papers together. "Perfect timing."

"Ah, horses don't care much about human affairs."

Gil held the lamp while Paole used his gift to check on the health of mother and foal. "She's doing fine. You'll wait out here? Then so will I."

They sat together on a hay bale and watched the mare shifting and panting, walking around the stall in an agitated fashion. Yveni wandered out to look and a few minutes later, so did Ferdi.

"I hope she's not shy," Gil said dryly, looking at the audience.

Luna ignored them. A few minutes later she lay down, arching to see the burden she was trying to expel. Gil remained unconcerned. Not long afterwards, the tiny hooves emerged, and in surprising little time, the foal came out in a sudden rush. Gil still didn't move, murmuring something about "she'll handle it". And so the mare did, cleaning the foal and nudging it to its shaky feet. She continued to lick it until the foal found her teats. As he began to suckle, a ripple of relief went around the watchful humans.

"He's lovely. A fine colt," Yveni said. "Pity she didn't have him before the others left."

"I can't bear the idea of them being slaughtered by soldiers." Ferdi turned to Paole. "Do you think I should put them down now?"

Yveni inhaled sharply. Gil waited for Paole's answer. Why was the old man asking him? "I say wait until you have to, Ferdi."

"We could set them loose," Yveni suggested.

"Kinder to kill them than to do that," Gil said. "I hate killing healthy horses."

"Can she be ridden?" Ferdi asked.

"In a couple of days. Not by you, though. You're too heavy, and so is Paole."

They all turned to look at Yveni. “No, sorry,” he said as firmly as he knew how. “That won’t work. Ferdi, Manel could take Luna and the colt. If we gave him a day’s start, he won’t be caught up in the fight. He’s not going to be much use as a soldier, he’s too small. But he could take these two and meet the evacuees. They could use him and the horses.”

Ferdi nodded. “Yes, they could, so that’s what we’ll do. The boy’s barely sixteen and his voice hasn’t even broken properly. I should have sent him away this afternoon. Thank you, Yveni. An honourable solution, and to that, I insist we open a bottle of wine and toast my new grandchild.”

Paole smiled at the description. Yes, a good plan, and though they might be all doomed, three more lives would be spared. Cause for celebration indeed.

They made a little party of it in the end, the six of them in the kitchen, eating Yveni’s good cooking and drinking a dark, rich wine that Ferdi had laid down years ago, intending it for something special. “If this isn’t something worth opening it for,” he declared, “I don’t know what is.”

“What will you name him?” Yveni asked.

“Ah, I hadn’t thought about it. Paole, I’m giving you that honour. A new life in your new life.”

“Me? Uh...all right.” He lifted the glass of deep tawny wine and considered. “I wish to call him...Mathias.”

Yveni sent him a startled look. None of the others knew the significance.

“A fine name,” Ferdi said. “To Luna, Mathias, and to our womenfolk.”

“To freedom,” Paole said.

“To shooting straight,” Yveni added, and Gil laughed.

Ferdi sent them all to their beds early, since they’d be roused at dawn. Everyone had taken it for granted that Paole would sleep in his old bed in Yveni’s room, and he didn’t want to make a fuss by arguing.

He used the washroom and went to the bedroom. He found Yveni, still fully dressed, sitting on his bed. “Nervous?” Paole asked.

“Yes. You?”

“Not really. I thought I was a dead man two years ago. The way I look at it, I’ve been on borrowed time ever since.”

“I didn’t save your life only to have you lose it in battle!”

“I didn’t set you free for the same reason. Yet here we are, even though you had your chance to go.”

Yveni tilted his chin stubbornly. “I won’t leave the defence of those I care for to other people ever again. I did it once, and that’s enough.”

“I understand. I’m not arguing with you. You should go to bed.”

Yveni nodded, staring at the covers. “Can I ask a favour? May I sleep with you tonight?”

“Yveni...”

“Please, Paole. If I’m to die, I don’t want to spend my last few hours and days apart from you. No one cares now if I have a lover or not. I just...want you to hold me. Please.”

The little wobble in that last word undid Paole completely. He went to the lad and put his arms around him, and Yveni pressed himself against Paole’s chest with a sob. “There, there, sweetness,” Paole murmured, stroking his silky hair. “Undress and hop in.”

Yveni looked up, eyes wet. Paole bent and kissed his lips.

“I’ve missed you,” Yveni whispered. “I never stopped.”

Paole didn’t dare speak of his own feelings. “Now I’m here. Go on, lad.”

They were soon tucked under the covers of Yveni’s bed, Yveni holding Paole crushingly close as if he was afraid Paole would run away in the night. “I’m afraid to die,” he whispered. “Am I a coward?”

“No. Just human.”

“We can’t win, you know that.”

“Maybe not. We can only do our best. Sleep now.”

Paole wasn’t afraid to die. But he was dreadfully afraid of losing Yveni. Did that make *him* a coward?

Yveni was firmly held in Paole’s arms when Gil woke him by shaking his shoulder. He wondered if he should explain, but Gil made no comment on their position. “Time to go, lad. Breakfast and then the square.”

He left them. Yveni sighed. The secret was out then. He twisted and kissed Paole’s forehead. “You awake?”

“Yes.” His big arms squeezed Yveni briefly, then set him free. “Go. I’ll meet you downstairs.”

In the servant’s kitchen, Gil was cooking eggs and griddlecakes, and had made a huge pot of tea. No one else was up. “Where are the boys?” Yveni asked.

“Still a-bed. We’re needed first. Did I tell you the governors really aren’t happy about you being here?”

“Too bad. They need me. You too, and your sons.”

“They do. Here, eat.”

He set a plate down in front of Yveni and took another for himself. Yveni had little appetite, but it would be a long day, and who knew when he’d eat another cooked meal?

“Sleep well?” Gil asked.

“Fine, thank you.”

“And Paole?”

“Him as well.” Yveni looked up. “Please don’t tell anyone.”

“Lad, what would I tell? Two friends comforting each other before battle? No shame in that, or anything else.”

His stare went on so long that Yveni had to look away. He shovelled some eggs into his mouth and swallowed. “If we survive, I’ll tell you about it.”

“If we survive, I’ll listen. You could have talked before. I tried to let you know I was sympathetic.”

“I...couldn’t. It’s complicated.”

“No doubt.” He looked past Yveni’s shoulder. “Good morning, Paole. Eggs, cakes, tea. Help yourself.”

Paole grunted, never being at his finest in the morning. Yveni ate in silence and prayed no one would say anything awkward.

Gil was more concerned about his mare and the new foal, and as soon as he finished eating, he dashed out to check on her, leaving Paole and Yveni to finish their meal.

Paole reached for the teapot again. “Did he say anything?”

“Uh...a little. I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Me either. Did it help?” He looked up with those piercing green eyes and stared into Yveni’s soul.

“You know it did. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Are you done? You’d better collect your pack. I’ll find you in the square.”

Yveni brushed his hand along Paole’s shoulder and wished he could steal a kiss. But he’d already pushed further than was fair. He didn’t want Paole angry at him. Not now.

All day Gil and Yveni and two hundred archers trained on the beach, firing again and again at targets set up on the dunes. Farther along, slingshots sent rocks hurtling into the sea, and at dummies set up on stands. Other dummies were used as sword and lance practice. Every so often, the dull thuds of explosions came drifting across to them. Paole’s work, for sure. They had too few cannon balls to waste on training.

The greatest weapon they had was surprise. Knowing where the enemy would land, and what tactics they’d employ gave the city a huge advantage. Most peoples other than Uemiriens discounted seers as witches and fantasists, so most likely the invaders would not know they were expected. If a large enough response was launched quickly, the Uemiriens *might* kill enough of the invading army to force a retreat or surrender, or to allow the second column of the defence to knock them out. But a good commander always expected surprise.

By sunset Yveni, exhausted, could hardly speak from shouting all day. He had blisters on his hands and a nice case of sunburn on his face and neck. Gil was in little better shape. “A very early night for you, my lad. But good work today. Your father would be proud of you.”

“Huh, you mean Weapons-master Alexis would be. I wish he was here.”

“Me too. But your father would have been pleased to see you take your responsibility so seriously. I was pleased to see it as well.”

Yveni smiled. "Thanks."

"Come along. Ferdi said he'd feed us, and Paole's bound to have something for our blisters."

Gil's sons joined them as they walked back to Ferdi's house, but only to speak to Gil and tell him how their day went. They were staying with friends and didn't want to impose on Ferdi, though Ferdi would have gladly had them. Gil spoke with them for some time and accepted hugs from all four before sending them off.

"Jaime's worried about Maria and the baby," he confided as they entered Ferdi's house. "It's hard to be a new father."

"Being a father at all. I suppose I'll never find out now."

Gil wagged a finger. "Enough of that talk, lad. We have a real chance, or were you not as impressed as I was today with our archers?"

"I was, but what if the soldiers have guns and armour? Or cannon on their ships with a long range?"

"Armour has weaknesses and guns can jam. No ship will come that close because of the cannons at the fort. I'm not saying it's easy, but you might father those children after all."

"Have to be married for that."

"Aye. As soon as we defeat this army, I'll help you pick out a bride."

Paole came down the stairs at that point and had to have heard Gil's remark. Yveni flushed. "He's joking, Paole."

Paole shrugged. "I'm sure. You two look a mess."

"We are. Blisters and burns—any cures, Master Healer?"

"I'll have a look. Go wash. I've just cleaned the stink off myself."

"Did you scrub your eyebrows off too?" Yveni asked.

Paole touched his forehead and looked a little abashed. "Ah, no. We had a bit of excitement, but it's going well. Go on. I'll meet you downstairs. Ferdi's cooking."

All Yveni really wanted was fluid. It had been hot, thirsty work on the beach with precious little respite. He and Gil both headed straight for the teapot.

"Have some honey in your tea," Paole ordered. "Good for your throat. I can put some salve on your face and neck when we go to bed."

Yveni's face went even hotter. Gil only glanced at him. "Got any salve for me?"

"Of course. Want it now or later?"

"Later. I'm going to take a look at the horses first."

"I'll come with you," Yveni said.

"Take your tea." Paole shoved the mug into his hands.

"Good idea." Gil grabbed his drink too. "Why don't you all go ahead and eat? Yveni and I will fill our bellies once we've slaked our thirst."

He picked up a lamp and Yveni followed him out into the courtyard. Luna whickered softly as she heard them, and Gil made soothing sounds as he approached. They found Mathias the colt suckling lustily, and his mother calmly eating from her hay crib.

“They look happy,” Yveni said.

“They do. I won’t disturb them. I wanted a bit of peace and quiet before Ferdi asked for a report.”

“Do you mind me being—?”

Gil raised his hand. “It’s fine, lad. I only meant a break from talking of battles and archery.”

“I know what you mean.”

He took a seat on a hay bale and Gil did the same. The mare and foal ignored them, but Yveni found it curiously settling to watch them. Such a normal, happy activity, even with war about to descend on them.

“You know, if you want to talk to me, Yveni...about...marriage or brides...or other matters, you can. I’d never judge you.”

“I know. Gil...I don’t want to wed. Ever.”

Gil sipped his tea and regarded him calmly. “Thought not. But if you could marry a certain tall and handsome healer, would you?”

“I don’t *know*. My feelings...they’re all churned up. I like him, I want him, I miss him, and when he moved out, I couldn’t think of anything else. But do I love him? And even if I do, does he love me, and can a grand duc have a male lover instead of a wife?”

“Deep questions, lad. Last first. Yes, why not? Your father’s first wife had no children, and the duchy was in no danger of collapsing. If you and your sisters hadn’t been born to his second wife, there were other successors. Distant relatives, certainly, but still in the family.”

“But with Konsatin—”

“Konsatin’s a separate problem. Leave him out since we have no idea what he’ll do, and you having a dozen children probably wouldn’t stop him. If you don’t wish to wed, then don’t. Even an arranged marriage should have something of desire between the partners.”

“Paole set me aside because he said people would look down on me for having a male lover. That Konsatin would use it against me.”

“True, he might. But it won’t be true forever, lad. Do you love him or not?”

Yveni sighed. “I really don’t know. How did *you* know?”

Gil laughed. “Sofia told me. Then she said we were to be married, and she’d be pregnant within the year so I could damn well get on with that too.”

“Really?” This was one story he’d not heard before.

“Oh yes. I didn’t argue. I figured it was her Sight. Now of course, I realise she knew I’d never get around to organising things so she took me in hand. Just as well.”

“I can’t imagine you not being married to her.”

“Nor I, so it worked out fine.” Gil smiled, as if at a memory. “I can’t answer your question about Paole, lad. I hate watching you two eat your hearts out the way you have been.”

“He? He’s pining?”

“Not as winsomely as you, no, but in his own quiet way. He doesn’t show all his emotions on his face the way you do. But if that man’s happy about not being with you, I’ll eat this hay bale and wash it down with mare’s milk.”

Yveni considered the image and shuddered. “Doesn’t matter now though. None of us are likely to see out the week, no matter what you said before.”

“Maybe we will and maybe we won’t. But we’re talking about here and now, aren’t we.”

“He doesn’t want to go to Sardelsa. Can’t blame him. And having a male lover won’t be as hard to swallow as him being Uemirien.”

Gil nodded. “All factors to consider, to be sure. But the first thing you two need to do is sort out how you feel about each other, and go from there. Yveni, you’re but nineteen. You have two years before you could claim the throne. Two years to be with him and build a relationship, if you want. If you don’t want to be with him for reasons of taste or compatibility, then fine. But don’t let cowardice be a reason.”

“He set *me* aside a whole year ago.”

“Yes. Because he cares about you. He’s a very brave man, Paole. A selfless man too. You could search a long time and never find a lover to better him.”

“You’re matchmaking, Gil.”

“Oh, you finally noticed, Your Grace.”

Yveni wrinkled his nose at him.

“You’ll have to be discreet, just as you need to conceal your identity. But not from your friends, lad. Not from me and Sofia and Raina, not those who love you and care for you. None of us give a damn who you love, so long as you’re happy, and we’d never betray your secrets.”

Yveni threw his arms around Gil’s neck and hugged him. “I know that. Gods, I wish you weren’t here because I want you all to be safe, but I’m glad you’re here anyway. It almost makes up for losing Father.”

Gil patted his back. “Ah, lad, I could never replace him, but when he died, I vowed to look after the three of you. Haven’t done a great job at it, but if I can mend this one small wrong, then it’s something.” Yveni set him free. “We should go inside. I don’t know what will happen over the next few days, but live for now, and while you can. The future will happen no matter what we do.”

“I want to change it, though.”

“So do I. And in my heart I believe we will. So hold on to that.”

Yveni submitted in silence to Paole smearing the soothing salve all over his face. He could make nothing of his friend's expression, nor of the careful, impersonal care he took in his task. "There. You'll sleep easier without that stinging."

"Thank you. What about your eyebrows?"

Paole grinned. "Oh, they don't hurt. Could have been worse. Could have blown my hand off. Nearly did."

"Be careful!"

"It's not as if I wanted to do that, Yveni. Accidents happen."

"They're not allowed to." He risked bending forward and kissing Paole's fingers. "I want you whole."

"So do I." He pulled away and went to the dresser to set the salve down.

"Sleep with me again?"

"Yveni..."

"Gil knows. He's not shocked. In fact he thinks we should be together. He says no one here would talk about it and we should do what's right for us."

"You don't think this is badly timed?"

"Yes I do. I meant sleep. Nothing else. I need you, and I want you. Unless you're a wonderful actor, you want me too."

"No, I'm no actor. But what if we survive it?"

He'd walked over to Yveni who now grabbed his shirt and dragged him close. "We talk. And this time, I won't be pushed away like some innocent maiden."

"All right. You have the most to lose, you realise."

"Yes. So it's me who should decide. Unless...you don't...care for me? I mean, it's been a year and maybe you—"

Paole made him shut up by kissing him. "No, Your Grace. That's not anything to worry about."

Yveni grinned. "Oh good. So all we have to do is beat the invading army and come out in one piece. Easy."

"Simple as collecting eel sperm."

"Is that easy?"

"It's bloody impossible. But so is beating kirtan fever, and escaping from slavers, and surviving shipwrecks. I'm going to hang on your shirttails, Your Grace, because you do have the most amazing luck."

"I do, don't I. Remember, it's a promise now. We'll talk."

"We'll talk." Paole kissed him again. "But now we'll sleep."

In Paole's arms, yes, he would. And maybe they would collect some eel sperm, despite the odds.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Arms and shoulders stiff and sore from the previous day's exertions, Yveni and Gil hauled themselves back out to the makeshift archery range the next morning. They had already sifted out the best archers from yesterday's cohort and sent the less able ones on to work with slingshots and other weapons. This morning they had to quickly assess a new group, and likewise send away those with faulty aim. They only wanted the finest shots on the seawall because they would have just one chance, and every arrow had to find its mark.

Ferdi had provided the two of them with wide straw hats, which helped, but the sun was still blisteringly hot, and an evil wind kept whipping up the sand and blowing it into their faces. They couldn't stop, though, because the weather could be equally hostile on the day of the attack. The archers would have to cope.

"Master Gaelin! Master Gaelin!"

Yveni gave the order to shoot and turned to the lad running up to them. "Yes?"

The boy panted with exertion, and gulped. "Governors need you at the fort. You too, Master Gil."

"Damn. Gil, Migel and Jaime can take over, can't they?"

"Let me find them. I hope this won't take long. Men, take a break!"

The archers flopped gratefully onto the sand or headed for the water butts to drink their fill while they could. Gil's sons came over from the lance practice area and Gil gave them brief instructions. Yveni and Gil had just separated the group by ability so the rest of the morning was practice. Hopefully they would be back by the afternoon.

Yveni mopped his face with his sleeve. "What's it about?" he asked the messenger. He was little more than a child, and Yveni suspected he should have gone with the evacuees. He wouldn't be the only boy to lie about his age to remain.

"No idea, sir. The governors are excited about something, that's for sure."

Yveni looked at Gil who shrugged. "Find out soon enough, won't we?"

At the fort, one of the governor's clerks greeted them, and after offering them water that they gratefully accepted, ushered them into the council chamber where the governors had assembled. The oldest governor, Leandro, rose. "Please take a seat, Your Grace. Thank you for coming so quickly."

"You're welcome. What's going on?"

“Our seers have Seen something which may affect matters quite seriously. You recognise this design, do you not?”

Leandro held up a piece of paper with the image of a white stag over a sunburst drawn roughly in charcoal. Even with this crude likeness, Yveni knew it instantly. “The Sardelsan standard! Where—”

“The three ships are flying it. They’re Sardelsan forces, Your Grace.”

Yveni stared in bewilderment. “Why would Sardelsa attack Horches? What possible interest could Konsatin have in your country?”

“I don’t know, but as you can see, this is something that materially affects you.”

Yveni turned to Gil. “Any ideas?”

Gil shook his head, frowning as he looked at the drawing of the flag. “None at all. Unless this is another part of his anti-Uemirien campaign, but what benefit is there in pursuing us back to our homeland?”

“None. He’s insane. But I can’t be part of an attack on my own people, Governor.”

Leandro bowed. “Of course not. We, uh...could place you in custody, but there’s little sentiment in support of that. I should warn you that your identity could be a liability after the attack.”

“Yes. Gods, this is... No! What am I thinking? I can stop this! I’m the heir. They owe me allegiance. I can command them to halt and withdraw.”

“Yveni,” Gil murmured. “You can’t guarantee they’ll listen.”

“No, but I have to try. I can’t sit by and let a city I love be destroyed by my people, all for the ambitions of that bastard.” One of the governors coughed but Yveni ignored him. “Bastard” was the least of the things Konsatin should be called. “Governor Leandro, I’ll meet them on the beach. Your forces can lie in wait, in hiding. I won’t reveal your plans, so long as you give me a chance to request a peaceful withdrawal.”

“Your Grace, you can’t go to meet them on your own, unguarded.”

“But I can’t ask anyone else to go with me.”

“I’ll go. My boys will go and so will Paole,” Gil declared.

But Leandro raised his hand. “I forbid that. You and Master Paole are too important to our defence. We can’t risk having you and your sons or any other key officers killed at the start of the battle.”

“He’s right, Gil. I forbid it too.”

“But to go on your own—they might not even believe you’re who you say you are.”

Yveni pushed back his sleeve and showed the tattoo. “There’s the proof. But with the governors’ permission, I can make a little bit of a showing if I have the aid of a tailor and some cloth.”

“And a horse?” Gil said. “By then Luna can be ridden with care.”

“If Ferdi agrees.”

Leandro spoke. "Your Grace, a small escort of our people could be permitted. Some of our firemakers, perhaps the mind controllers, since they'll be on the beach anyway. A person of your rank should have a guard. I'll go too."

"No! That I can't allow," Yveni insisted as a clamour of polite protest broke out among the six governors.

"Your Grace, may I remind you who rules in Horches? I'll go, and that's final."

"No, Leandro, I will." Another governor stood. "I'm childless and a widower. I also speak Tueler. You have a family. I beg to be allowed this honour."

"I don't need anyone—" But Yveni was silenced by a stern look from Leandro.

"Raul, we can discuss this. One of us will be at His Grace's side, and we'll be accompanied by a suitable escort. Your Grace, what do you need?"

"A standard, tidy clothes and tabards for the escort in Uemirien colours. And if we fail, you'd best have a good defence ready. Please don't give me access to any more plans."

"Very well, Your Grace. If you'd care to return to your home, I'll send what you need there. Master Gil, I'm sure you want the choosing of the escort."

"I do indeed." Gil's frown looked permanently etched on his brow. "Yveni, this is most likely to fail."

"Governor Leandro, what do the seers See?"

"A confusion. The future is too finely balanced. I have been counselled not to speak to you of specifics."

"I understand. It won't make a difference to my plans. Gil, will you come back now?"

"For an hour or two. Paole will wring your neck, lad."

"Um...yes." Yveni hadn't thought about the impact on those closest to him. "Raina too when she hears of it. Hopefully she'll hear it from me."

Leandro coughed politely. "Your Grace..."

"Yes, sorry. We should be going." Yveni stood and bowed. "Your courtesy and kindness won't be forgotten, governor. One day I'll rule in Sardelsa, and we'll be your friends once more."

"I look forward to that day, Your Grace."

Paole came barrelling into the storeroom two hours later. Yveni and two tailors had set themselves up there to work on a Sardelsan flag for him to carry as he met the army. Unfortunately Gil had left a few minutes earlier, so there was no one to hide behind.

"A word in your ear, 'Gaelin'?"

"Not now, I'm busy."

Paole stood in front of them with his legs spread, arms folded, an imposing man-mountain. An extremely angry man-mountain. "Don't make me come over and pick you up, boy."

One of the tailors looked up in shock, doubtless amazed at the disrespect being shown to the vicont. “Uh, never mind him,” Yveni reassured him. “He’s a friend.”

“Gaelin, I’m waiting.”

Yveni gave Paole a dirty look. “Carry on. I won’t be long,” he said to the tailors, while keeping his eyes firmly on his ill-mannered visitor.

Paole wanted to go at it in the house foyer, but Yveni insisted he come out the back to the courtyard instead. He squared off to Paole, determined to have his say first.

“Before you start, nothing you say is going to change my mind, and it was the governors’ decision not to let you go with me.”

“That’s not why I’m angry. Why did I have to hear about it from one of their minions instead of you? Some damn friend you are, Yveni.”

“Oh. I, uh...”

“Knew I’d be worried sick so you decided not to face me. Last time we had a serious quarrel it was because you avoided talking to me. Do you want another fight?”

“No. But this isn’t anything to do with you. It’s my business as heir.”

Paole shook him by the shoulders. “The hell it’s not, boy. You’re mine, and I want to know what affects you, even if I can’t change it.”

“Yours?”

“Bought and paid for.”

Even with Paole’s anger, Yveni wanted to grin at the fierce possessiveness. Warmth warred with irritation, and finally won out. He rather liked the idea of being Paole’s, so long as chains weren’t involved. “What about those manumission papers?”

Paole scowled. “You’re still mine. And don’t be smart. Is Gil going to protect you?”

“Not directly. The governors can’t afford to lose people like you, and I agree. But he’s putting together a squad of men with useful gifts. I’m not that much more at risk than I would have been anyway.”

“You damn well are. They could cut you down before they reach the sand. You won’t get a word out.”

“That’s why we’re making the standard. The mind controllers will cast confusion if they sense an attack, and Gil’s planning cover from behind the sea wall. I have to do this, Paole. It’ll save lives on this side and those of my people. They don’t need to die.”

“No. Will they accept you as duc?”

“No, because I won’t be. But I can claim their allegiance and hopefully turn them away from Konsatin. I can’t pretend it’s a sure thing. But it’s my duty.”

Paole pulled him close and hugged him. “If I lose you...”

"If I lose *you*. This is for you and Gil, not just me. If this works, no one has to die." He looked up and Paole kissed him. "I'm sorry I didn't come to you. It was all such a rush."

"Forgiven but in future, don't hide from me. It doesn't help."

"No. You should go back to work."

"I'll take some lunch here. Is there anything I can do?"

"No. The only weapons we'll be carrying will be sword and bow. If there's a fight, our best chance is to run. Ferdi's letting me use Luna. There's another horse which had pulled up lame but will probably be all right for a short walk, which Governor Raul will ride."

"It'll be an impressive show," Paole admitted grudgingly.

"That's what we hope." He took Paole's hand. "Come and eat. But wash up first—you reek of gunpowder."

The flag was finished by the evening of the following day, along with a light, strong flagstaff and a leather flag cup on a belt custom-made for Yveni's measurements. The tailors completed the tabards at their own shops, so Yveni was left kicking his heels at Ferdi's house, forbidden to go near the training grounds. He could only look after Luna and Mathias, who didn't need much beyond feeding and watering, and fletch hundreds of arrows for Gil, a task deemed safe enough for an "enemy". No one seriously saw him as one, not yet. But if the Sardelsan force succeeded in their attack, Yveni would have to choose sides. He couldn't bring himself to think about it, and Gil and Paole, with unusual tact, didn't raise it either. Ferdi had only clapped him on the shoulder and said the plan would work so not to worry about it. Yveni wished he had the old man's optimism.

The city felt like a strung wire, vibrating with tension and anticipation, the day before the ships were to arrive. Grim-faced men walked the streets, worried about their own fates and those of their families. Gil's sons came to call that evening, conducting quiet conversations with their father in a huddle, before plastering on smiles as they joined Yveni and Ferdi for supper. Paole worked late into the night that final evening, stumbling home and allowing Yveni to feed him tea and thick meat stew before he fell into bed half-dressed, with Yveni holding him close.

Yveni couldn't sleep. He'd chafed for so long that he'd been unable to help those closest to him, or even himself—his sisters, the captured Uemirien children, Gerd, had all suffered without him being able to affect their fates. Now thousands of people and a grand old city—an entire country, no less—placed their trust in him and his claim to the ducal throne. Yveni could only place *his* faith in the honesty and loyalty of the soldiers coming on those ships. But what if they weren't Sardelsans at all? What if they were from Enholt? Or Karvis? This could all go horribly wrong.

Paole groaned in his sleep. Yveni kissed his forehead and let Paole's solid warmth comfort him. The plan had to work. The safety of too many good people was at stake. It had to work or he'd die in the attempt. He'd really rather *not* die, though.

Paole and Gil accompanied Yveni to the fort in the morning, where he formally handed himself into the custody of the governors. All that meant in practice was that he'd eat breakfast and lunch with them, and be their guest until they needed him that afternoon. Paole said he'd return before noon, since his role was done—he had no skill in throwing anything, bombs or lances, because of his blind eye, and even if he had, he said, he'd still be at Yveni's side to the last moment. Yveni had no heart to argue with him, and Gil seemed relieved that Paole would be there.

The governors left him in the library most of the morning, since the governors had much to do and he could play no active role in preparations. Ferdi and Manel walked Luna and her colt over to the fort's stables, and he spent some time with them, talking about the horses, and admiring Mathias's pretty form. Manel had the gift of mind control and had pleaded with Gil to be allowed to join Yveni's escort, but Gil had refused.

"Stay with Ferdi and defend the house," Gil had told him, much to Manel's chagrin. The lad's bravery only increased Yveni's guilt, but Manel wouldn't be the only innocent youth to die if their plan went wrong.

Paole turned up in time for lunch, and Ferdi and Manel dined with them. A curious calm had descended on the fort and its officers. All the citizens preparing to defend their city were now in position, or so Yveni understood. The seers had narrowed down the arrival time to midafternoon. Gil and others with the Vision would keep watch from the top of the fort's towers, and direct the action with flags and other signals. They'd see the ships long before they came into cannon-shot range.

The others ate with a heartier appetite than Yveni could manage. His stomach was a knot, and even tea made him nauseous. His mouth was dry and his armpits soaked. A sorry excuse for a commander he was. He said nothing of his fears to anyone, but Gil had never needed to be told anything explicitly. At least he and Paole did him the courtesy of not asking how he felt. Ferdi was the only one apparently immune to nerves, talking cheerfully about his early days in the city as a simple cloth trader, and how he'd met his wife when she forced him to accept a sharp deal with her family's firm. He even coaxed a few laughs out of the assembly, and Yveni prayed to every god he knew that the old man and his household would be safe that day.

The governors sent Ferdi and Manel home after lunch and Governor Leandro himself told them to stay out of harm's way. Gil went down on one knee to kiss Yveni's hand, then stood and hugged him. "I'm proud of you, Yveni. Whatever happens this day, you're your father's son, and there's no higher praise."

"Do your best for your country, Gil."

“Your Grace,” Governor Leandro said, “I’ve allocated a dressing room upstairs where you can prepare yourself and wash. I’ll have word sent there when you’re needed.”

“Thank you.”

Paole got to his feet and bowed. “With Your Grace’s permission, I’ll be your valet.”

Yveni gave a little start in surprise. “Uh...thank you.”

Gil patted Paole’s shoulder. “Don’t make him too pretty or the soldiers will kidnap him instead of obeying him.”

Yveni felt his face heat as the governors hid smiles behind polite hands. Paole just grinned. “Leave it to me. You do your job, I’ll do mine. Your Grace?”

The “dressing room” was one of the governor’s offices, with a small washroom to the side. Yveni only wanted to wipe his face and dress in the new clothes that had been quickly and expertly prepared, but Paole insisted on delaying. He took Yveni into his arms. “You have two hours to kill, and I can help you with the nerves.”

“I can’t dally with you now. It’s not seemly.”

“Mind out of the gutter, boy. I want to give you a massage, that’s all.”

“Oh.”

“Take your shirt off, lie down on that chair and be quiet, if you can.”

Yveni stuck his tongue out. “You should be more respectful.”

“You’re no heir to any throne I owe allegiance to. You’re just my rebellious ex-slave. Lie down.”

Amused rather than annoyed by Paole’s bossiness, Yveni obeyed. If someone was this determined to look after him, far be it from him to argue.

Paole’s big, strong fingers dug into painful knots in his shoulders, but in their wake, his skin felt warm and his muscles limp. He hadn’t known Paole had this skill. “I wish you hadn’t sent me away,” he murmured.

Paole kissed him between his shoulder blades. “I thought it for the best, sweetness.”

“Well, next time we have to ask Gil before we make any decisions about our relationship because we’re too stupid to do it right.”

Paole’s laugh rumbled deep. “Aye, we are. But it did us no real harm, and you’ve grown up in the last year.”

“I’ve grown over seven centimetres.”

“Not what I meant and you know it, brat. You still don’t know how you feel about me.”

Yveni rolled over and looked up into Paole’s face. “I know if you send me away again, I might just die.”

Paole cupped his chin. “Don’t exaggerate.”

“I mean it. I’ve lost so much. Don’t make me lose you again.”

“You never lost me, Yveni. It was the way you had me that we had to decide.”

“Paole...” Yveni pulled him down and kissed him. Paole’s warm hands slid over his chest, and down his stomach. “Someone might come...”

“I locked the door. I want you.” He kissed Yveni again, groping and kneading his wanton skin.

“Do you see me arguing?”

Paole grinned against his mouth, then undid Yveni’s belt and slid his trousers down, and off. He bent and kissed Yveni’s stomach while Yveni knotted his fingers in Paole’s thick hair and arched up against the feel of lips against hot flesh. Paole’s mouth eased lower and Yveni shivered, hardly daring to breathe.

Paole cupped his backside, squeezing and massaging, lifting Yveni’s hips and bringing his eager cock to his mouth. Yveni gasped as Paole took him in, tongue and lips working him while his fingers dug into Yveni’s buttocks, spreading and exposing him. Would...surely not today, not here...

But then he stopped thinking about anything but the pleasure swamping him in waves, the tightening of his belly as Paole’s clever mouth and hands played him, bringing him to the very brink of climax, and easing off just as Yveni was sure he’d come. Yveni gripped his shoulders, fingers digging hard and mercilessly in a futile attempt to force Paole to bring him off, but the man would not be hurried and he would not be bullied.

Yveni came precisely when it pleased Paole to allow it, Paole swallowing it all and refusing to let him wriggle out of his grip. He could only cry out quietly to relieve his feelings, and lay his hands on Paole’s hair as he rested his face on Yveni’s stomach. Yveni knew Paole was grinning even without being able to see him.

“That...probably wasn’t seemly,” he managed to say.

“Not in the slightest.” Paole twisted and looked up at him. “Are you angry?”

“You can be very stupid sometimes.”

Paole kissed his stomach and grinned even more widely. He looked insufferably smug, but then Yveni felt rather smug too. Certainly limp. Very relaxed.

Ah...but Paole...

“What would you like me to do for you?” He felt rather proud his voice hadn’t quavered at all, even though the way Paole had played with his buttocks had raised all kinds of alarming ideas.

“What would you like to do?”

“D-do you want to f-fuck me?”

Paole lifted his head, startled. “Uh...not here, sweetness. We haven’t...I mean, we need oil.”

“Oh. I thought you wanted...”

“I do. But not today.” He winked. “You have to ride a horse later.”

Yveni’s face became red hot. “Oh. Oh!”

“Yes. Sit up, and let me sit next to you.”

Yveni obeyed. Paole loosened his trousers and his large and slightly terrifying erection sprang free. Yveni couldn't really imagine...actually he could, that was the problem. "You're, um, big."

"Thank you." He sat down next to him. "Put your hand on me, sweetness. Won't take long."

Yveni did as he asked, though the angle was awkward and his nervousness made him clumsy. But then Paole tilted his head towards him and kissed him deep and longingly, and Yveni forgot to be nervous because he loved being with Paole, touching his warm skin and being kissed. He concentrated on the soft skin of Paole's cock, using the same movements that gave him pleasure, listening for the little gasps and jumps to tell him what worked better, the way he'd learned to listen to a horse to guide, not to force. But Paole was no horse, and touching him, pleasuring him, was infinitely more precious. His friend thrust eagerly up into his hand and in no time at all, Yveni's hand was covered in hot come, Paole gasping quietly into his mouth as he climaxed.

"Thank you." He rested his cheek against Yveni's, whispering into his ear. "Thank you, Yveni."

"You're welcome."

Paole looked down at Yveni's sticky fingers. "Right. Now I really had better clean you up and get you dressed, or I'll be a poor excuse for a valet."

"You're the best valet I ever had."

"You had one at the castle?"

"No." Paole gave Yveni a look for that disingenuousness. "So you're definitely the best."

Paole mock smacked him, then picked him up in his arms, which irritated him greatly. Yveni couldn't help grinning as Paole staggered under his weight.

"Told you I'd grown taller," he said sweetly. "Now put me down. I told you I don't like it."

"Sorry, Your Grace. Your bath awaits."

His "bath" was just a ewer and basin and cloth, but Paole carefully cleaned his hand and face, combed his hair and helped him dress, straightening his new shirt and jerkin, adjusting his trousers and eyeing him critically at such length that Yveni was forced to complain.

"You're no valet. You should be a ladies' maid."

"So long as you play the maiden..."

Yveni made a face. "Well? Do I look the part?"

Paole stepped back to check once more. "Aye. Every centimetre."

"I wish you could be with me, but I'm glad you won't be. If it comes to a fight..."

"We'll all do our best. You, me, Gil and the others. Do your job as well as you can, and that's all anyone asks."

Now all he could do was wait. He sat quietly with Paole's arm around him, not talking, but being held, and occasionally tenderly kissed. When the knock came, he only jumped a little, then stood. "I need to go."

“I’ll walk you down to the stables.”

He squeezed Paole’s hand and they walked outside together. Governors Leandro and Raul waited for them in the courtyard. The two horses were splendidly fitted out, with every buckle and catch shined to mirror perfection, and their manes braided with ribbons in the Uemerien colours of red and gold.

Luna whinnied as Yveni stroked her muzzle. “Thank you for this,” he said quietly. Her foal lay in the stall, dozing on a thick bed of straw. With any luck, his mother would be back before he was ready for his next feed.

Paole boosted him into the saddle and handed him the flag. Yveni planted the flagstaff firmly in the leather cup at his belt. “Good luck, Your Grace.”

“Thank you, Paole. Thank you all. Governor?”

Their escort waited for them at the bottom of the fort’s causeway that led onto the beach. Yveni paused to salute them and thank them for being there. The men looked very professional with their new tabards and their polished weapons, but there were so many young, worried faces. For the very first time, Yveni had a true inkling what it meant to lead an army, and what failure would cost. He let none of his emotion show in his face.

“Right. Forward, if Your Excellency pleases.”

Governor Raul nodded, and they started the slow march along the beach, to await the invaders.

As soon as Yveni disappeared through the tunnel that ran through the fort and out to the beach, Paole ran up the steps to the watchtower, where Gil kept his lookout. “There he goes.” Gil pointed towards the beach. The two riders and the squad of men behind made an inspiring show, but Paole couldn’t help thinking how vulnerable they were out in the open.

“I hate this,” he said.

“Me too. The ships are heading in fast. Sardelsan colours flying proud too.”

Paole could barely make out the ships, but Gil could probably count the number of men on the decks, and even describe them. Below them, Yveni and the governor walked their horses gingerly along the sand. Neither mount could be worked hard, but all that mattered was how they looked. Luna with her bay coat and pretty blond mane, and the black stallion beside her, both curried and brushed until their coats shone, made an impressive sight in the afternoon sun.

“How long?” Paole asked.

“Not that long. The wind’s with them and they’re coming in at speed. They have to disembark. Forty minutes at most, I’d say.”

Paole wished they’d given him a few more minutes alone with Yveni, if that was the case. The lad had been tight as a bow, though not when Paole had finished with him.

“What are you grinning about?” Gil asked.

“Nothing. Just something Yveni uh...did.”

Gil raised an eyebrow. “Oh yes? In the governor’s office?”

“My lips are sealed.”

“Uh-huh. You and he sorted out your little differences?”

“Getting there.” He nudged Gil less than gently in the ribs. “You’re a bit of an interfering sod, though.”

“Been doing that since the boy was seven. You can’t expect me to stop now. Come on, come on, you bastards.”

From the seaward side, the incoming soldiers would see nothing but the seawall and on the beach, Yveni and the others. The Uemiriens hid behind the wall or the fort. Unless Yveni told the Sardelsans, they should have no idea what was waiting for them. “Are you sure you shouldn’t be down with the men throwing your bombs?”

“I couldn’t make myself throw anything while he’s out there.”

Gil grunted as his eyes continued their watch on the ships. “I doubt I could give the order to fire either. Fortunately it’s not up to me.”

“We’re a fine pair, aren’t we.”

“Yes, indeed. Now, Sofia, she’d launch the catapult herself. My wife’s the tough one. Gods, I hope she’s all right.”

“They’re bound to be.”

They fell silent, waiting, watching and hoping. The wind blew Yveni’s flag out and made it stand proud. Paole hoped it would make the right impression. Everything depended on that.

“They’re weighing anchor,” Yveni said to Raul.

“Good. I wish we’d waited a bit. It’s so damn hot.”

“I know. But they would have been able to see the beach with their telescopes for some time. We had to be here.”

“We could have set up stuffed dummies.”

“Yes, we could. Not long now though.”

“I hope they get here before I need a piss. I’m an old man, Your Grace. They could be more considerate.”

Yveni smiled. “I’ll tell them that, if they give me a chance to speak.”

“I don’t know how you can be so calm. I’m three times your age and my knees are shaking.”

“Mine too. I, uh, had help to relax. A massage.” He hoped he didn’t betray that understatement in his tone.

“Now why didn’t I think of that? Next time I put my life in danger, I’ll remember it.”

“Very good, Your Excellency. They’re launching boats, see?”

“They haven’t fired their cannon. Is that a good sign or not?”

Privately, Yveni thought it signified very little. “Of course it’s a good sign. This will work, I feel it in my bones.”

He almost believed himself too.

“Here they come,” Paole muttered. “No one’s fired a weapon.”

“The ships are out of range and their rifles won’t be accurate from a moving boat. But I’m not seeing anyone aiming. Rifles at the ready, yes, but not at shoulders.” Gil leaned forward. “There’s a man...by the gods, it’s Commander Markov!”

“Recognise anyone yet?” Raul murmured.

“No, they’re too far away.” Yveni wished he could communicate with Gil who surely could see faces now. “Men, come to attention.”

The escort straightened up with a muted crunch of weapons and leather. Not long now.

“Good news?”

“It should be.” Gil bit his lip. “I’ve been away for so long though, and Konsatin’s an evil bastard.”

“So’s Yveni when he puts his mind to it.”

Gil let out a short startled laugh. “Aye, he is. My money’s on our boy.”

The boats landed on the beach and soldiers swarmed out of them. Yveni steadied Luna and held the flag proudly in place. When the soldiers halted fifty metres from their position, he shouted to them. “I am Yveni, vicont of Sardelsa, son of the late Grand Duc Arkady, heir to the line of Elaini and the ducal throne. I order you to stay your attack!”

“What’s happening?” Paole demanded, cursing his ungifted eyes.

Gil’s voice had dropped almost to a whisper, as if afraid he might somehow influence what he observed. “Yveni’s talking. Markov’s coming closer, men behind him readying weapons—”

“What? No, they can’t—”

Gil grabbed his arm. “Wait, wait, they’re not aiming them. Yveni’s rolled up his sleeve—he’s showing them the tattoo. Markov’s kneeling. They’re all kneeling!” He turned to Paole. “He’s paying homage! It worked!”

Paole sagged weak-kneed, staring at the distant shore and the miracle that only one stubborn brat of an ex-slave could have pulled off. Would have even tried to pull off. Gil slung his arm around his shoulders

and hugged him as the other men in the watchtower cheered. The sound spread, building in intensity, a wave of sound running all the way behind the sea wall. Paole turned and looked down in the courtyard where Governor Leandro stood. He waved. "It worked!"

The governor waved back, and even from here, Paole could see his grin. "Damn that Yveni. He has amazing luck."

Gil laughed as he shook his head. "So did his father. Runs in the family."

The sound of the cheering men behind the sea wall greatly startled Markov and his officers. Yveni took satisfaction in how thoroughly they'd planned the surprise, even if it would now not be needed.

"Your Grace, I never thought to see you alive again."

"You have no idea how happy I am to see you also, Commander. Please stand. May I introduce the representative of the governors of Horches, Governor Raul?"

Markov bowed. "Your Excellency."

"Greetings, Commander," Raul replied in clear if accented Tueler. "You and a select group of your officers are welcome, if you'll surrender your weapons while enjoying our hospitality, but I must ask you to send the rest of your men back to the ships."

"I'll arrange it. We came to take revenge on your country for the death of our beloved vicont. I'd say we've had a wasted journey."

"Not at all, Commander," Yveni said. "We'll wait for you to speak to your men."

Raul coughed a little. "Commander, you'll understand that any approach from the ships without permission will be treated as hostile."

Markov bowed again. "Only reasonable, Your Excellency. Your Grace, please excuse me while I give the orders."

Yveni waited until Markov was out of earshot before whispering sidelong to his companion, "Well, that was easy."

"Gods." Raul mopped his brow with a handkerchief. "You're very bad for my heart, young man. You know him?"

"Very well. He gave me a paddling when I was five years old for waving a sword around and nearly cutting my hand off. I've almost forgiven him."

Raul grinned. "I don't think he'll try it now. I suppose we better think about where we're going to put all these damn Sardelsans, eh?"

"You know, I don't think you'll find too many people upset to have that problem, Your Excellency."

Paole and Gil had to fight with the cheering crowds pouring into the fort and the square outside it. The wardens and governors did their best to clear a space for Yveni and his companions to enter the fort, but as

he and Governor Raul appeared from inside the tunnel, the noise of shouts and whistles and general elation made the ears of their mounts lay back, and the two men struggled to control them.

“Gods, they’ll make the horses panic. Let me through!” Gil bellowed. “Let me through, damn it.”

Paole pushed through behind him, his size brooking no argument from the ecstatic crowd. Gil reached Yveni and called something up at him, while holding hard onto Luna’s reins and keeping her calm. Yveni nodded and dismounted, and a few seconds later, with Paole’s help, so did the governor.

“Let’s take them through to the stables,” Gil said. “Or there’ll be harm done to man and beast.”

Paole only had time for a quick smile at Yveni who grinned back, before Paole tugged on the old stallion’s reins and led him away from the clamour.

The thick walls of the inner courtyard cut off much of the sound, to the relief of the horses who were on the verge of panic by the time they reached the stables. Gil petted and stroked Luna, praising and soothing her. Paole did the same with the somewhat more sedate black stallion, and led him to a stall, spreading hay into his crib and pouring water into a bucket for him.

“We may as well wait here,” Gil said once Luna was reunited with her foal, and Mathias was suckling happily. “We’ll never get a look in.”

“Aye. No hurry now, though I should tell Ferdi the news.”

“I think you’ll find Ferdi already knows. That man has a spy network that would make the Karvin king jealous. No, take your ease, man. You’ve earned it, and so have I. Gods, what a bloody day.”

He collapsed onto a hay bale and wiped his face with his hand, showing all of his forty-nine years in the lines of his face. Paole sat too, his legs suddenly weak. He had a future. They all did. Every time he accepted the possibility of death, damn Yveni came along and saved him. All of them.

“The lad leads a charmed life,” he muttered.

“He’s had his share of ill-luck too. But this is definitely a blessing in disguise. It’s the breakthrough we’ve been waiting for, you realise. If he can swing it, Markov can help him return to Sardelsa and gain the throne.”

“What? You think so?” Paole stared blankly. The possibility hadn’t even entered his head. “Are there enough soldiers? And will they bear arms against their own people?”

“Those are the unknown factors, of course. But this is the best chance he’s had since he left Sardelsa, and the best chance he might ever have.”

Paole felt suddenly sick. Of course Yveni had to go. But Paole couldn’t go with him. Yveni had his destiny to fulfil, an inconvenient fact they had both ignored over the last few frenetic days. Nothing had changed, in fact. Only the opportunity.

“I’m glad if it is,” he said firmly. “He’d make a very good ruler.”

“Yes, he would. I always thought that.” Gil glanced at him shrewdly. “It won’t change how he feels about you.”

"I never thought it would." Paole would *not* talk about this with Gil before he talked to Yveni, or before there was any reason to. And if Yveni had to leave, then that was that.

He wasn't allowed to mope for long. One of the governor's servants came looking for them soon after. "Their Excellencies' compliments, sirs, and would you both care to come inside and meet the new arrivals?"

Gil climbed slowly to his feet. "I would, definitely. How about you, Master Paole?"

"I think I could be persuaded, Master Gil."

Yveni did his best to be polite and listen to the congratulations of the city's more prominent citizens, but what he really wanted was Gil and Paole to hurry up so he could meet Markov in private session and learn what was happening back home. He needed Gil there because the man was his lieutenant in fact if not in law, and Paole, he wanted there because...well, because he did.

Ah, there they were. He tugged on Leandro's sleeve. "Your Excellency, if we could withdraw?"

Governor Leandro called for attention. "Good people, today we have great cause for rejoicing, but your governors still have work to do. Please, continue your celebrations, but excuse His Grace Yveni and me."

A cheer went up, and Yveni waved in acknowledgment, while firmly moving towards the exit. Gil caught his eye and made his way over, Paole behind him. Gil shook his head at him. "You, my lad, continue to astonish me."

"I astonish myself. Are you all right?" he added to Paole. His mouth was turned down unhappily and for the life of him, Yveni couldn't understand why.

"I'm fine. Are you sure you want me here?"

Yveni grabbed his hand. "Absolutely. Come on. Gil, you have an old friend to meet."

The Sardelsans and several of the governors had been moved to the council chambers, where it was a lot quieter than the main hall, and given refreshments. A servant came up to Yveni and the others with fruit juice and water, and Yveni gratefully accepted a glass. "Gods, thank you. I thought we'd fry out there."

"Better fry than die," Gil said.

"This is true. I'm still shaking." He grinned at Paole, but the man could barely raise a half-smile in response. What was wrong?

Governor Leandro clapped his hands for silence. "Gentlemen, if you could all take a seat, I'll ask Commander Markov to address the meeting. Raul, would you translate, please?"

"Thank you, Your Excellency. Your Excellencies, Your Grace...Huntmaster Gil," he added with a grin. "Good to see you again, my friend."

"Same here, Markov. Now tell us what the hell's going on back home."

“Perhaps I should explain why we’re here. When His Grace the vicont disappeared, the regent turned the country upside down looking for him.”

“Hah,” Yveni muttered.

“No, it’s true, because I led the search. We found the horses and the clothes you left behind, but you’d vanished.”

Yveni smirked. Gerd had been very good at his job.

“A month or so later, as Gil’s probably told you, His Grace the regent announced that he had evidence that Uemiriens were involved in your disappearance. This led to a good deal of persecution, for which I apologise, Gil. By the gods, I thought it utterly wrong.”

“Never mind, Markov. All in the past.”

“No, it’s not. I mention it because two months ago, His Grace announced that he was now certain the vicont was dead and that Uemire was behind it. He whipped the duchy up into a fury.”

“Wait. What about my sisters?” Yveni demanded.

“I haven’t seen either of them in months, Your Grace. Statements are issued by the Vicontes Serina but I honestly doubt she has any hand in them. I know the regent is desperate to have you declared dead, but so far the cabinet is blocking him.”

“Good,” Gil muttered. “Go on.”

“I was ordered to take a force of our best and most loyal soldiers to Uemire and punish them for this crime, and if possible, bring back evidence of your death.” Markov coughed behind his hand. “I, uh, may have a little difficulty with that.” Yveni grinned. “Now His Grace the vicont informs me the regent plotted his murder, I’m no longer bound by my oath to support him, but am, instead, obliged to support the lawful claimant to the throne. Which is the Vicont Yveni.”

“So Konsatin gets rid of his most senior army commander and three ship loads of the most loyal soldiers by sending them on a fool’s errand,” Gil mused. “Convenient, wouldn’t you say, Your Grace? Commander?”

“Now you mention it, Gil, I believe you may have a point.”

Yveni stood. “Which makes it imperative that I return and oust this criminal with all haste. If we act now, we’ll wrongfoot him. He won’t expect an attack, and certainly not so soon. Commander, you will sail back to Sardelsa and I’ll go with you. If necessary, I’ll fight all the way to the castle.”

“Very good, Your Grace.”

Paole made a peculiar noise. “Excuse me,” he said gruffly and walked out of the room without waiting for anyone to do so.

“Paole!”

Gil caught Yveni’s arm. “Let him go, lad.”

Yveni stared at the door that had closed behind his friend...his lover. Then he shook himself. "All right. Your Excellencies, with your permission, I'd like the soldiers to be allowed to reprovision on the mainland, but not in any way that burdens the population."

Governor Leandro nodded. "We'll see what we can do. But Your Grace, allow me to offer you some advice. I understand the need for haste, but these last few days will have shown you how difficult a military campaign with a small force can be. I counsel you to take a little time to plan and seek advice. There are those in the city who may wish to go with you and fight at your side."

"Aye, lad," Gil said. "Though Sofia will skin me alive."

"No, I forbid it."

"Let's talk about it. Some of us have skills that might be useful."

"Your Grace," Markov interrupted. "A day or two, even a week, will make little difference."

"No more than a week, then," Yveni grudgingly allowed. "But I won't be talked out of it, let me make that clear."

Markov bowed. "I wouldn't dream of it, Your Grace."

The rest of the discussion centred on the billeting of Markov's officers and provisioning. Governor Leandro arranged for Yveni to return to the fort the following day to consult with Markov.

"What about the evacuees?" Yveni asked.

"There are four seers among them," Gil said. "They'll be on their way back if I know my wife, and I do."

Yveni grinned. "Good. Then I think you and I should take Luna and Mathias home, and perhaps Ferdi could be persuaded to open another bottle of his good wine. This needs celebrating."

Gil rubbed his eyes. "Even if it didn't, I need a damn drink."

Luna had calmed down, and her colt nuzzled Yveni's hand as he took his lead. "Look at him. All this drama and all he wants is a bellyful of milk to be happy."

"Horses are a lot more sensible than many people I know. Come on, girl." Gil *schnicked* to make the mare walk on. They set off through the now peaceful streets, though from the taverns, the sound of celebrations could be heard. The city wardens would be busy later.

"What's wrong with Paole?" he asked.

Gil chewed his lips thoughtfully. "Not really for me to say. But you can work it out if you recall what you'd just decided when he walked out."

Yveni replayed events in his mind. "Because I'm going back?"

"Yes. This morning, he'd have thought the chances of you both living through it were slim, but if you did, the prospect of you going home was still remote. Now you're planning to depart in a week."

"He can come with me!"

Gil tsked. “Think about it, lad. The man had a dreadful time of it as a slave, worse than you probably know. For the very first time in his life he’s happy, settled and free. And in love, or near as makes no difference.” Yveni glanced away, embarrassed. “And either he goes with you and gives up everything he’s longed for all his life, for a place with you which might mean living in the shadows, or he loses you. If this last year’s anything to go by, that’ll hit him hard.”

“I have to go home, Gil. It’s not just for me, it’s for Serina and Olana. You know that.”

“I do, and I’m not arguing. Paole’s the one suffering, that’s all I’m saying. Whatever you do, try to see things from his view.”

“I will. I...I think I love him.”

“That’ll do to be getting on with,” Gil said dryly. “Love or not, go easily with him.”

“You said you’d come back too.”

“I said I’d fight for you to return, and I mean it. But as for staying, lad...I need to talk to my family. I can’t be holding your hand forever.”

“I don’t want you to! I just don’t want to lose you again. I’ve lost so many people...” Yveni stopped and hung his head. “I’m sorry.”

Gil put his hand gently on his neck. “Now, don’t cry, lad. You’re a hero, remember?”

“I know. But if you and Paole and Raina... Why can’t Serina rule instead of me?”

“None of you will if you don’t get rid of Konsatin. The rest can be sorted out later. Don’t cry, Yveni. Oh, come here.”

He pulled Yveni into a hug and Yveni sobbed shamelessly into his shirt, overwhelmed and overwrought. He thought he’d be happy to be going home and yet all it meant was losing the people he loved.

“There, there, lad. You’re strong and you have a knack of pulling your nuts out of the fire, so maybe something will work out. Sometimes life means pain.”

“It’s been nothing *but* pain for years.”

Gil pushed him away a little so he could look into Yveni’s eyes. “Nothing? What about this afternoon in the governor’s office?”

“What do you...did he *tell* you we had sex?”

Gil grinned. “No, lad. You just did. Fun, was it?”

Yveni put his hand over his mouth. “Not saying,” he mumbled through his fingers.

“Never mind. Now wipe your face and let’s get these horses home. They’ve had a long day and so have you.”

Yveni sniffled and took the colt’s lead again. How could he have been so stupid as to say that? And to cry all over Gil as well. He wasn’t a *child* any more. At moments like this though, he really wished his father was still alive.

“Your father would have been proud of you.”

Yveni stopped dead. “How did you know I was thinking of him?”

“I didn’t. I suppose it’s natural our thoughts turn to those we love. I miss him still.”

Tears filled Yveni’s eyes again. “So do I. Everyone back home too. But I’ll miss everyone here.”

“Now don’t start up again, I just calmed you down. You’ll worry Ferdi.”

Yveni scrubbed his face with his arm. “There.”

“Well done.” Gil clapped his shoulder. “So, how *was* the sex?”

“Gil!”

Paole lay on his bed, arm over his eyes, utterly uninterested in the noises of celebration and happy conversation from downstairs. Ferdi had demanded a full report, and Paole had managed to give it, but then excused himself on the grounds of feeling unwell. No lie, since he felt truly sick at heart.

A little later he’d heard the house’s front door bang, and more exclamations and laughing. Gil and Yveni had returned, he supposed. Gil at least. Maybe Yveni was still at the fort. He had an army now. He was a *leader*. He’d come of age today, done them proud and won a great victory without a shot being fired. A real hero.

Paole felt like a pig, being unable to rejoice along with everyone else. Yveni was only doing exactly what he’d always said he wanted to do. Paole could have worked out what would happen if he’d succeeded today. But Paole hadn’t *wanted* to. Because it meant losing the most precious thing in the world to him, and he wasn’t ready for that. Not today. He didn’t feel strong enough.

Give him time and he’d endure. He’d endured much, much worse. He’d endured Ebner and his filthy habits and his rapes. He’d endured the other masters with their whips and endless cruelties. He’d beaten kirten fever too. Giving up Yveni wasn’t even in the top dozen worst things he’d lived through.

It just felt that way, that was all.

He tried to fall asleep but it wouldn’t come. So he lay there, thinking of nothing, trying to feel nothing, the way he had so many nights when he’d been enslaved, hoping to make it through another night, another day, until he won his freedom. Funny, he’d never believed he would and never thought he’d come home. Yveni had given him that, even if he’d not been able to find his family. They’d checked all the records, but Paole’s name wasn’t in them. Too long ago, and his parents might never have gone anywhere the names were collected. He knew now they would have searched, would have kept on hoping. But he also knew how impossible it would have been to find him without crossing over to Karvis, and few Uemiriens did that voluntarily.

It hadn’t mattered too much for him because he’d had no real hope. But if Yveni really was leaving, maybe Paole would do some travelling around Uemire and look for himself. He could spread the word

about what happened to the slave children and what the parents could try. Yveni said he'd do what he could, and Paole believed him. It would be something. Something to hang on to.

The door opened and closed. "Paole?" Yveni whispered.

He didn't answer. He couldn't speak without weeping and he refused to weep.

He heard the thunk of Yveni removing his boots, and the soft padding of his feet as he crossed the floor. Then the weight of him on Paole's bed, and the weight of him on Paole's body. Paole's arms went around him as Yveni rested his face in the crook of Paole's neck. Oh, how he'd missed this. How he would miss it too.

Yveni's words were a warm breath against his neck. "I love you, Paole."

"I know. I'm sor—"

Yveni put his fingers on Paole's lips, silencing him. "Just hold me."

So he did.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Paole was still asleep when Yveni rose, heavy-eyed and heavy-hearted. He thought about waking his lover but considered it kinder to let him rest. He kissed his forehead and slipped out of the room.

Gil, Ferdi and the two servant boys were at breakfast, so Yveni didn't speak about Paole or about his plans. Instead the talk was of when the women and children would come back, and when the city would return to normal. Yveni ate and let the others carry the conversation.

"You'll come with me this morning?" Yveni asked Gil when he'd finished eating.

"Of course. Are you ready?"

The streets were quiet, though some of the market stalls were back in operation and some of the shops were open. Yveni suspected the main reason for the slow start was the volume of ale consumed the night before.

"How's Paole?" Gil asked.

"Asleep. Miserable. I don't know what to do."

"Do as you must, and talk to him. Concentrate on the task in hand, though. This isn't a childish enterprise. Your return could spark a civil war."

"I'm aware of that," Yveni snapped. "Half our constitution was developed after the last war to prevent another ever happening again. Of course, we didn't plan for murderous regents. I want to be rid of him, and I don't care how we do that, so long as the people don't suffer."

"That's the trick, isn't it."

They walked on in silence, Yveni contemplating the awful prospect of another war rending the prosperous and peaceful duchy he loved. Sardelsa was one of the richest and most stable members of the Unity of duchies. If it could be thrown into conflict so quickly, it must send a chill through other less prosperous or secure entities. It could destabilise, even destroy the Unity. Yveni couldn't allow that to happen.

They found Markov and the other officers waiting for them in a secondary chamber kindly provided by the governors, though none of them were present. Markov explained that Their Excellencies felt it wasn't for them to be involved in Sardelsan internal politics. "They won't ask any citizen to go with our force. But they equally won't hinder them."

Yveni nodded. "Only fair. Now, your views?"

“There are two approaches, Your Grace. One is the frontal, bold push, the other the secretive entry. The risk with the former is that it creates maximum civil disruption and exposure. The latter means you can’t count on public support and Konsatin could murder you and dispose of you without anyone being aware you’d returned.”

“I won’t slip back into my own home like a thief. No, we make a show, but with no public accusations regarding Konsatin’s treachery unless he forces our hand.”

Gil agreed. “People will be happier to accept a miracle from the gods than that they’ve been duped. The less ill will you create, the more united your backing.”

“I have a thousand men, Your Grace. Konsatin’s brother had sent three hundred from Enholt for ‘support’ before I left. We have to assume more have arrived.”

“Yes,” Yveni said. “But Enholt won’t want all-out war, not without a credible pretext. Handling the public mood will be essential. Our friends from Uemire will have to keep a low profile, and their role kept discreet.”

“But there will be Uemiriens with you, I promise,” Gil said. “If you had but one or two seers, a handful of mind controllers—”

“Excuse me, Gil, what are you talking about?” Markov frowned in confusion.

Yveni sat back and let Gil explain, enjoying the wave of surprise and even alarm among the Sardelsan soldiers as they realised that the tall tales and myths about Uemiriens were actually true, and had been the reason they came close to defeat in battle the day before.

“By the panoply of gods,” Markov breathed. “If we had that kind of help, it would make all the difference. But will we have it?”

“We can ask. The Uemiriens might not be too friendly to us right now.”

“Understood. But to see the future! Incredible.”

“Not exactly ‘see’,” Gil explained. “They receive a series of images, which can be difficult to interpret, especially when the future is rapidly changing and the seers are far from the event. When the images are consistent across seers, and to each one, then the probability is greatest. That’s why you need more than one, if you can. A skilled seer, such as my wife, can work on her own, but two or more is best.”

“Then we can only hope we receive that help.”

They talked until noon, making plans. The key issue was the population. If Yveni met hostility, then he’d have to choose whether to force his way forward or not. He couldn’t stomach the idea of fighting his own people or going against the heartfelt wishes of the majority. But the idea of leaving them in Konsatin’s hands equally revolted him. He couldn’t abandon his sisters either. Gil raised the idea of assassination, which met with some support among the officers.

“You’re asking me to begin my reign with a heinous crime,” Yveni said. “How is that different from what Konsatin is doing?”

“You’re the heir.”

“He’s the lawful regent. No. Killing him in battle is one thing, but not murdering him in his sleep.”

“Putting him down like a mad dog,” Gil muttered.

“He’s bad, not mad. Try him, then hang him. That’s the law.”

He instructed Markov to refine the plans as discussed, for further examination the following day, and met the leader of the city wardens to arrange recruitment. Other than asking the Sardelsan officers to offer advice and training to the Uemiriens to bolster their defences, he could do nothing more that day.

Only as he walked back with Gil did he realise he hadn’t given Paole a second’s thought since that morning. His desire to leave Horches died on the spot. The sooner he left, the sooner he’d be without his lover.

But maybe that would be the best. Cut things off cleanly and quickly. Too late for that, though.

Gil noted his preoccupation. “You’re worried about the plans?”

“Aren’t you?”

“I’m more worried what Sofia will do to me when she finds out I’m going with you.”

“You don’t have to come. Your Vision’s helpful, but not essential.”

“Lad, I know that castle like the back of my hand. I’ve a feeling that’ll come in useful. Besides, I’ve got a personal stake in this. Bastard chucked me out of my job and my home, and slandered my son. He’s made a lot of my people very angry indeed.”

“True. But Sofia won’t just skin you alive, she’ll come after me. Once you’re down, who’ll protect me?”

Gil grinned. “Every man for himself, Yveni. Now. I’d best find my sons and tell them what’s happening. Could you let Ferdi know I’ll be home later?”

Ferdi was back in business, sitting in the foyer and looking over his orders with his clerks hard at work in the back office. “How did it go?”

“Fine. Never planned an invasion of my own country before.”

Ferdi grimaced. “Can’t be fun. I have some more bad news for you.”

“Damn. About Sardelsa?”

“No, you. You’re sacked as a clerk, I’m afraid. Can’t have an heir to a duchy working for me. Looks odd.”

Yveni grinned with relief. “That’s all right. I’d have to resign anyway since I’m going home. Where’s Paole?”

“He’s moved back to his apartment. The crisis is finished, after all.”

“Oh. Then I’ll go over—”

Ferdi put his hand on Yveni’s arm. “Wait, lad. I think you should give him some time. He had a lot of things on his mind. I suspect you were one of them.”

Yveni was torn. What if Paole was waiting for him to come over? “Can I ask a favour, Ferdi? Would one of your boys run over with a message from me later?”

“Of course.”

He’d let Paole know he’d come at any time. Then he’d have to wait and see if he was called.

Paole sat in his closed shop and wondered if he should even attempt to open for business before Raina came back. His young clerk had evacuated with the rest, so it was just him to handle things. He’d been in the shop for hours and not a soul had called by—too many other things to worry about, he suspected.

He should have been doing an inventory but he couldn’t seem to get moving. Instead he sat and stared at the rows and rows of drug drawers and bottles, not seeing any of them. Instead he remembered the day before, with Yveni. The sweet sounds he’d made, and the taste of him. Feeling him humming with life and health and desire, and the bright flare in his loins as he came. The first time, and possibly the last, unless Paole threw away all he’d built up over a year and went running after the boy. Which the boy might not even want.

The only thing missing from his life over this year had been Yveni. When they’d reunited, Paole had foolishly thought he could want for nothing more. Stupid of him. Life was never that generous. What it gave with one hand, it took with the other.

Now he had to decide which meant more to him—his business or his lover. Perhaps Yveni had already made the choice and all this stress was for naught.

He grunted and stirred himself. He had work to do, and if Yveni was a lost cause, the work was all he’d have. Better get on with it then.

The evacuees turned up the following evening, earlier than Gil would have predicted. Sofia explained that their seers had been fairly confident of Yveni’s success and had decided to start back the day the Sardelsans arrived.

Raina was beside herself with happiness, until Yveni told her firmly she would not be going to Sardelsa with the army. “You promised I could train in the infirmary! And Sofia’s going. It’s not fair.”

“I did promise and I meant it. But I don’t have any power to put any trainee in the infirmary now. You’re still studying at the university and Paole depends on you, and Sofia’s got a useful gift.” And Yveni well knew he hadn’t a hope in hell of dissuading her.

“I’ve got a useful gift too. I’m a healer!”

“The army has medics, and I’m not changing my mind. Don’t even think of stowing away either. This isn’t a book, Raina. I’ll have those ships searched top to bottom before we leave.”

“I don’t like you at *all*.”

Gil grinned over her shoulder at him. “Too bad, my lady,” Yveni said. “Now run along and see how your employer’s doing. I think Ferdi’s holding an open house so you could invite him to supper.”

“Why don’t you invite him? He’s *your* lover.”

Sofia winced. Gil put his hand on her arm. “Yveni’s got things to deal with here. We’ll see you at supper. Paole will want your news and your drugs.”

Raina pulled a face, but climbed back aboard the wagon and flicked the reins to make Denil move. Sofia wiped her brow as she watched the wagon rumble off. “I’ve aged ten years, I swear. Husband, you may make me tea. Yveni, I’m so glad you had the good sense not to argue with me, and to prevent her going.”

“One of you is more than enough.” He jumped smartly to avoid her smack. “I’d be happier if you remained. I don’t need to say that.”

“No, dear. So Paole’s not going with you?”

“Uh.” Was that a prediction?

Gil rescued him. “There’s a few things to sort out, Sofia. Leave the lads to work it through. Come inside.”

It ended up being quite the party, with Gil’s sons, their families, Ferdi’s servants and *their* families, and even some of the neighbours. Yveni was the toast of all present, and beleaguered by questions until he finally hid in the kitchen and begged Sofia to save him.

“Some hero,” she scoffed. “Here, take this out to the horses.” She handed him some fruit and vegetables that were a little past their best but fine for the animals.

“Raina hasn’t returned?” Paole’s shop boy had brought Denil back some time ago, but not the wagon.

“I’ll send her to you when she does.”

The cool night air was a blessing after the heat in the house. Luna heard him coming and poked her nose out of the stall, knowing that humans often had treats in their pockets.

How often had he done this? Come down to the stables to visit Ande, or some of Gil’s other charges, to bribe them with fruit or sweet things, and make friends with them. Some of the happiest memories of his life were connected with horses. Would he have time for this in the future, once he was grand duc? His life was about to change again, and again quite dramatically. All his life he’d prepared for it, but he’d never asked himself if he’d *enjoy* it. Still, enjoy it or not, he had to do it.

“Sofia told me you were hiding like a coward out here.”

Yveni screwed his nose up at Raina as she leaned over the stall to look at Mathias. “I notice you took your time.”

“I was talking to Paole and helping him inventory what I returned. Is he really not going with you to Sardelsa?”

“Did he say that?”

“He didn’t say he was. He barely talked of it at all. Yveni, what did you do to him? He’s so sad.”

“Nothing.” He sighed. “At least, not to him personally. I have to go back, and he has to stay.”

“Why?” She folded her arms. “Why can’t he go?”

“He can. But...why would he? He’s made a life here. Even if we succeed, why should I ask him to uproot himself again?”

“If you don’t ask him, you won’t find out. Maybe he thinks you don’t want him to go.”

“I don’t.”

“Yveni, that’s horrible of you.”

He tsked. “Don’t be an idiot, Raina. I only meant that I don’t want him in danger, any more than I want you to be. I don’t want Gil and Sofia going either.”

“I think you’d better talk to him.”

“I don’t want to pester him.”

She reached over and took the piece of fruit from his hand. “Go talk to him. Now.”

“I can’t just—”

“Go. Now.”

“I’m sure he doesn’t want to—”

She turned him around and slapped his bottom.

“Raina!”

“Go. I’ll tell them where you’ve gone. Take the lamp, I can see well enough.”

Strange, somehow he’d thought that becoming a duc meant *he* would tell other people what to do. He forbore from saying this. She’d only be sarcastic at him.

Paole had undressed for bed when he heard the banging at the shop door. He glanced at the bedroom clock. Honestly, how could a herbalist’s have an emergency, and at this hour?

Cursing heartily, he pulled on his trousers, not bothering with a shirt, and prepared to give a bollocking to his inconsiderate visitor if they didn’t turn out to be a city warden.

The person banged on the door again. “Knock it off!” he yelled at them. They’d break the window glass doing that.

He flung the door open. “Do you mind—”

Yveni stood there, lamp in hand, shifting nervously from foot to foot. “Um...hello. Raina told me to come over. I thought about lying to her, but I felt perhaps I should, in the end. Um...were you asleep?”

“Bit late to ask that, don’t you think?”

“Yes. Uh...look, I’ll tell her I came over and you told me to go—”

“Thought you weren’t going to lie to her. Do you want to come in?”

Yveni nodded, his head bobbing jerkily. Paole stood back to let him through. “Come upstairs.”

He only had a single room, with a bathroom to the side. It was all he'd needed. Now he felt vaguely annoyed Yveni should see it when he was about to leave and Paole's home could be of no possible interest to him. "So what did Raina want you to talk about?"

"Well, this. You. Being...hostile. Sad, she said." Yveni set his lamp down and blew it out. "You got my note?"

"Aye."

"Are you angry with me? You know I have to go back, don't you?"

"Aye." The single syllable was all he could force out and still sound calm.

"Paole, I can't ask you to come with me. It's not fair to you, and it's incredibly dangerous. I know we thought we'd have more time than this, but we don't, and you have a life here. You've worked hard for it, and this is your home now. It's right that you stay."

"You have it all worked out, don't you? Why did you bother coming over—to tell me what you'd already decided? Doesn't look like I have a say at all."

Yveni bit his lip and looked down at the floor. "I'm sorry."

"Raina said Sofia was going."

"Yes. Because Gil is."

"And you haven't stopped her."

"I can't. I mean, I *could*, but they're husband and wife. I don't have the right to interfere."

"If we were married, would you be telling me to stay?"

"No! Yes, I..." He held out his hands. "Paole, if anything happened to you, I'd *die*."

"But I'm supposed to sit here on my arse and wait for you to be killed? Because we're not *married*?"

Yveni dropped his hands. "I'm an idiot, aren't I."

Paole smiled. "Yes. Come here, you nitwit."

Yveni ran to him and Paole crushed him close. "How could you *think* I'd want to stay here when you're in danger?"

"But your home, your business..."

"My love. You. Do you want me to come with you, risk aside?"

"Now who's a nitwit?"

Paole laughed. "Well then. I'll trust to your luck. But I can't be seen as your lover. Your reputation—
"

"Be damned. Either you come with me, share my cabin and my bed, or neither of us goes. The duchy of Sardelsa will have a duc with a male lover or no duc at all. That's final."

"Very good, Your Grace. Would Your Grace care to join me in my bed now?"

"Paole, please stop talking."

Chapter Twenty-Five

They sailed four days later, with fifteen Uemiriens added to the thousand sailors and soldiers who'd come to invade Uemire. The farewells had been painful, even for those who departed quite willingly. Raina cried for the whole day before they left, and she'd definitely have tried to stow away despite his warnings if Paole had not begged her not to. He needed her to keep the business going, he said, whether he returned or not. "You wanted to be a healer and study at the university, so do it. Prove your father wrong," he told her. She'd barely stopped sobbing long enough to hear him out.

Now it was done, and if they survived the trip, the hardest part would come once they landed. Yveni had done his best to conceal his nerves from the soldiers as he boarded the ship, but Paole knew how much he dreaded the sea journey. Now he came up beside him and put his arm around Yveni's shoulders. "A fair day for it."

"Let's hope it stays that way. You've never been on a ship before?"

"No. So far I like it."

"After a whole hour?"

"Well, it's a start." He bent and kissed Yveni. Yveni had made an announcement before they set off that Paole was his lover and should be treated with the courtesy due his consort. Paole had clearly decided to take full advantage of that position—not that Yveni minded.

"Ah, Your Grace."

Yveni turned and Markov smiled at him. "Commander, what can I do for you?"

"More what I can do for you. Gil informs me that you've had no sword practice since you left the duchy."

"No, I've had little need to."

"Now you do. We'll do our best to protect you, but in a fight, you can't rely on that alone."

"You expect me to practice here?"

"There's a wide deck, and little else to do. Certainly I expect it. Weapons-master Alexis used to speak quite warmly of your abilities. Have you forgotten all you learned?"

"Of course not. Gil put you up to this, didn't he?"

"Yes, I did." Gil came up from the hatchway, grinning broadly. "Of course, I'm to be put to the test as well, Your Grace. Paole, you could—"

Paole put up his hands. "Not on your life, Gil. I heal people, I don't use swords on them."

“You might find those we encounter don’t make a distinction, Master Paole,” Markov said politely. “At least consider some hand-to-hand training.”

“Strange how no one mentioned any of this to me before I left,” Paole complained. But he allowed one of the officers to lead him to the upper deck where mats had been laid. Yveni would have liked to watch, but Markov was serious about the sword training. Respectful though the commander was, he gave no quarter in the practice, nor made any allowance for Yveni’s lack of fitness. He made Yveni warm up properly, then drilled him for a good two hours with sabre and foil.

He graciously allowed a short break when Yveni couldn’t lift the sabre any more. “Commander, I can’t continue.”

Markov only smiled. “Nonsense, Your Grace. You’ll find your second wind any time now.”

“Doubt it. Maybe I should concentrate on my shooting.”

“Funny you should mention that. I have plans for this afternoon.”

Yveni stared up at the man. Clearly power had made him insane.

“I’m dead.”

“Mflm.”

“You’re dead too?”

“Yflsm.”

“Good night, Paole.”

“Slmf.”

They arrived at Nukin port on a crystal-clear, warm summer morning—even though they’d had to weigh anchor some kilometres offshore for two days. They decided to wait out the bad weather Sofia Saw that would have turned their arrival into a dismal, soggy mess.

Presentation was everything. They sailed in with the Sardelsan standards flying proudly, borrowed Uemirien drums beating cheerfully, the soldiers on deck wearing new sashes in ducal blue and Sardelsan gold, and the civilians on board waving flags of the Unity and Sardelsa. Yveni wore another new suit, a rosette in blue and gold on his chest. He disembarked with Commander Markov at his side, the commander in his dress uniform and best sword. The Uemiriens remained on board for now, for Yveni worried the crowd might vent their anger at Uemire’s supposed crimes before he had a chance to change opinions.

The mind controllers subtly influenced bystanders to come and look, and the noise and attention drew others. Yveni, standing on a ladder set up by two soldiers, waited until a large-enough crowd had assembled to create a spectacle before he held up his hand. The soldiers all came to attention with an impressive, unified snap. “People of Sardelsa! I am Yveni, vicont of Sardelsa, son of Grand Duc Arkady. I’ve returned to my country, by the grace of the gods!”

The clamour that broke out was more confused than outright joyful, and shouts of “Prove it!” rose above the crowd noise. Markov held up his hand for silence. “I’m Markov, commander of the ducal army. I was sent to Uemire to avenge His Grace’s death, but by a miracle, I found him alive and return him to you.”

Yveni came in again. “You were told I had been killed by Uemiriens, but Uemire helped save my life and made it possible for me to return. Who will help me? Who are the loyal citizens of Sardelsa who will lead me home?”

Now the roars were genuinely happy. Yveni stood and let people rejoice and vow loyalty for as long as they wanted. At the back of the crowd, around fifty soldiers in a uniform he didn’t recognise moved into position, but took no action. Markov had seen them, but Yveni took his cue from his commander and pretended to ignore them too.

A group of well-dressed men made their way to the front of the crowd and introduced themselves as the mayor and councillors of Nukin. Yveni stepped down to greet them. “Your Honour, councillors, my apologies for the lack of warning. I’m still rather dazed at being able to return after all this time.”

“Your Grace,” the mayor said, “would it be rude to ask for proof of your identity?”

“Not at all.” He bared his arm and showed them the tattoo of a symbol that every Sardelsan learned to recognise. “Commander Markov, please show His Honour your papers.”

The mayor and his councillors examined the documents for some time, and asked Markov some pointed questions that verged on the hostile. Yveni smiled and tried not to show his nervousness. When the mayor stepped back, Yveni’s heart leapt into his throat. What was he about to do?

But then the man knelt, and so did the councillors. A great roar went up through the crowd, and like a ripple, the people began to kneel, the front rows first, and the ones behind followed.

Yveni grinned with relief. He held up his hand. “I come to serve Sardelsa. Long may she prosper!”

Another huge cheer and waving of hats. Yveni bid the mayor and councillors to stand. They approached with equally wide smiles.

“Your Grace, what are your plans? We can offer you hospitality...”

“Thank you, Your Honour, but I’ve been away a long time, and I want to return home.”

The strange soldiers at the back of the crowd melted away. Yveni couldn’t ask Markov about them until they had some privacy, but he had his suspicions.

Moving on wasn’t that simple, of course. The rest of the soldiers and the civilian passengers had to disembark, horses for Yveni, the officers and some of the soldiers borrowed or bought from the city’s stables, and Yveni and Markov asked to pose for photographs by the local newssheet. Yveni was delighted to spend as long as the reporters wanted, posing and answering questions. The more publicity, the more acknowledgement, the harder it would be for Konsatin to deny his existence or his return. And the greater

Yveni's support, the more likely he'd be able to challenge Konsatin's regency and have him removed by whatever means necessary.

Paole watched the events on the ground with more anxiety than he'd felt the day Yveni had gone to meet the Sardelsan invaders. He could see just fine, though he wished Gil had supernatural hearing rather than sight because he'd have given a testicle to know what was being said. But when the crowd knelt and the waves of deafening cheers hit the watchers on the ship, Sofia hugged her husband and then Paole.

"It worked," Gil crowed. "He's pulled it off!"

"He's made it work here," Paole said. "There are three more towns before we reach the castle, and I didn't like the look of those soldiers."

"Me either, but they've dispersed. They're wearing a ducal insignia but I don't recognise the uniform."

"Konsatin's men?"

"Could be. The question is, does he feel confident enough to challenge Yveni here? I wouldn't have thought Konsatin was that popular when we left, but a lot could have happened since then."

"Like him building a private army," Sofia said, shivering. "That's not a good sign."

"We never thought it would be plain sailing the whole way, love. What do you see?"

"A confrontation. Soon."

"Result?"

She turned to the young man, Juen, on her left. "What do *you* see?"

"A battle," he said. "But it's not clear."

"Too close to call," she agreed. "Better warn the lad."

But getting anywhere near Yveni was an exercise in patience, and even though the mood of the crowd was welcoming and joyful, Paole couldn't help worrying. He didn't trust this race, with its bigotries and twisted politics. He feared the people could too easily turn on Yveni, just as it had turned on the Uemiriens.

Gil squeezed his shoulder as they waited their turn to leave the ship. "He's doing fine."

"It's not *his* actions I'm worried about. Do you think we should cover our heads?" Gil had hair as blond as Paole's and was very obviously not Tuelel.

"No. We have to trust him and Markov to look out for us, Paole."

"And your wife."

"That goes without saying." Gil grinned as he nudged Sofia with his hip.

"I've been looking out for you for thirty years, my man. I won't stop now."

It took an hour before Paole reached Yveni's side. They'd agreed public gestures of affection should be avoided, as it would be between a duc and duces, so he only smiled at his lover as he reached him.

Yveni stood in a small knot of soldiers, a little distance from the crowd kept under discreet control by the army. “Well done, Your Grace.”

“Thank you, Paole.” Yveni grinned at him. “Did you see? Wasn’t it wonderful?”

“Very much. A great relief. Now what happens?”

“Councillors Vitali and Artyom have offered to accompany us as Nukin’s representatives, and I’ve accepted. We’ve been offered lunch at the mayoral residence, and then we press on.”

“What about those soldiers? Sofia said she saw a confrontation.”

“I need to ask her about that. In fact, excuse me for now.” But he mouthed a more tender, private farewell before he turned away.

Feeding and watering a thousand troops was a considerable feat even for a large city like Nukin, but the city councillors managed it. The city square was turned over to the army for several hours while the mayor feted Yveni, the army officers and the Uemiriens. That the presence of so many troops just outside the elegant mansion gave Yveni complete protection from the alien soldiers—helpfully identified as Karvin mercenaries by the mayor—was a fact mentioned aloud by no one.

Paole thought it worrying that the city’s official had accepted the Karvin troops so easily. Did they not see what a threat this posed to their peace and security? But he couldn’t ask Yveni and didn’t feel it was his place to ask any of the soldiers. He had to hope Yveni and Markov had considered all the implications.

He was glad when they finally mounted their freshly provided horses and started on the road to the castle, eighty kilometres from the city. A two, no more than three, day march, if all went well. Sofia’s warning sat heavily on his mind. A confrontation? Where would it come?

Sooner than any of them expected. They’d been travelling only two hours when they found their road blocked by Karvin soldiers and actual barricades. Yveni and Markov called a halt but made no move towards the barrier, forcing an officer to come forward and address them.

“By order of His Grace, the regent of Sardelsa, you must dismount and surrender into custody.”

“Have you proof of this? And identify yourself, man,” Markov snapped. “I don’t recognise that uniform or your rank, and as commander of the army, I will not be ordered around by a foreigner.”

“I’m Lieutenant Dietrich, *sir*, and I am employed directly by His Grace. I owe you no allegiance.”

The two councillors beside Paole gasped and Yveni smirked. Paole knew why. The lieutenant did his master no favours.

“Well, *lieutenant*, whether you do or you don’t, all the soldiers in the duchy answer to me. If you won’t produce your orders, I feel no necessity to discuss them. However, since His Grace the regent wants His Grace the vicont held in custody, I can’t imagine how the vicont could be *more* in custody than he is right now.” Markov swept his hand back to indicate the body of soldiers. “I’m bringing the vicont safely to his home, which is surely His Grace the regent’s only wish. You need not concern yourself.”

“The regent has ordered—”

“Lieutenant, get out of my way and clear the road, or I’ll do it for you. I have a thousand men, you have a mere hundred or so. Do I have to spell it out more clearly?”

The man clenched his fists, looked around at Yveni, the other officers, the dozen or so Sardelsans from Nukin, the Uemiriens and the huge mass of armed men behind them. “This isn’t over.”

“Yes it is. You have five minutes. Move!”

Markov stared implacably at the Karvin force in front of them. Yveni didn’t do or say anything. Paole felt helpless and just a little bit afraid. Would it work? Would it keep working?

With incredible relief, he saw the soldiers moving and the crude wooden barricades grudgingly shoved aside. Markov ordered some of his men to go forward and form a line between the Karvi and their people, before turning to Yveni and loudly saying, “Your Grace, my apologies for the brief interruption.”

“Carry on, Commander.”

Markov ordered his troops to march on. He and Yveni led the way on their borrowed horses, looking neither right nor left as they passed the Karvin soldiers. Paole and the Uemiriens followed their lead, though the two councillors and the Sardelsan supporters glanced nervously from side to side as they walked their horses through.

Once they were well clear and out of sight of the Karvi, Paole rode up alongside his lover. “Is that the end of it?”

“I doubt it. We might have to show our hand more decisively. Markov?”

“I agree, Your Grace. It’s very risky, with this far to go.”

“Then we go as far as we can before we do that. But at some point, Konsatin will have to be directly challenged. I think we need to take control of the communications as we discussed.”

Paole didn’t know what they were talking about, but it had to have something to do with the fact a number of their mounted soldiers peeled off and rode at speed ahead of them. “Where are they going?”

“Making sure Konsatin doesn’t win the propaganda war—or summon more troops,” Yveni said. “There are telephone exchanges which we need to take control of.” He smiled sweetly at Paole. “Not sorry you came, I hope.”

“Wouldn’t miss it for the world, Your Grace.”

Yveni grinned. “Commander, can we pick up the pace just a little?”

A hundred and fifty of the soldiers had been given horses to ride. The hundred remaining rode ahead with Yveni and the civilians, while the foot soldiers marched at their best pace. The aim was to reach a town called Teinemel in time for the soldiers to make a bivouac, but a kilometre from the town limits, their path was once again blocked—this time by civilians.

Yveni and Markov rode forward, with ten soldiers as guard. Paole could only watch, and wonder what the problem was this time.

“I’m sorry, Your Grace, but the regent has sent orders to forbid you entry to the town and deny you hospitality.”

Yveni felt quite sorry for the sweaty-faced mayor. No town officer should be in this position.

“Were you given a reason?”

“He said you were an impostor.”

Markov moved forward. “Excuse me, Your Grace. Sasha! Good to see you!”

One of the men standing in the road waved back to him. The mayor turned to look. “You know him, Commander?”

“I should think so—he’s my brother-in-law. Sasha! Come up and meet His Grace the vicont.”

The man walked up, grinning at Markov. “Mila wrote only today. You have a new grandson, Markov, did you realise?”

“By the gods, safely arrived then? We should drink to that...only there’s a slight problem. Oh, forgive me, Your Grace. Sasha, His Grace, the Vicont Yveni. I assure you he’s the real thing. I saw him being born and spanked his little bottom more than once.”

Yveni turned to the man. “Now, now, Commander. I’ve grown up just a little since then.”

“Indeed you have, but I still managed to thrash you the other day.”

“At least my backside was safe.”

Sasha frowned. “I don’t understand. Why would the regent say he’s an impostor?”

Yveni turned to Markov, who replied, “Because I’m coming to arrest the Margrave Konsatin for conspiracy to murder the vicont and for treason. He’s doing all he can to prevent the lawful heir to the ducal throne returning to his home, and using you gentlemen as part of that plot.”

The mayor clasped his chest in horror. “T-treason?”

“Yes, indeed.”

“Your Honour,” Yveni said. “I fled the duchy two years ago because of a conspiracy to have me killed. The margrave was the instigator of that. I’ve only survived because of the help of Uemire and the stroke of luck that sent Commander Markov to that country. As vicont and heir, I ask for your help and your support.”

“The Karvin troops...there’ll be a battle in the town. Your Grace, we’re only small. Please, don’t wage war around us.”

“We won’t. All we ask is to pass through the town and speak to your people. Any of your citizens who want to join us can do so. Konsatin will summon his troops back to the castle. They won’t waste time in reprisals.”

Sasha plucked at the mayor’s arm. “We can’t stop them, and I for one will ride on. I always thought there was something fishy about what we were told.”

The mayor's face contorted as he struggled to decide. Yveni gave him a little help. "Your Honour, why don't you and your fellows ride back to town, and let your people know what's happening. Ask those who are afraid to stay indoors. We'll pass through without causing any difficulty."

The man bowed. "Give us an hour or so, Your Grace."

"Willingly. Thank you."

The mayor ran back to his comrades. Sasha waved. "See you soon, Markov."

Markov saluted his brother-in-law, then turned to Yveni. "Should we take a route to avoid the next two towns?"

"No. That leaves Konsatin's lies unchallenged. We have to meet them head-on."

"As you wish, Your Grace."

"What's going on?" Paole asked, straining to see Yveni farther down the road.

"No idea." Gil said. "Oh, wait, they're leaving."

"So we won?"

"Not necessarily," Sofia said. She suddenly galloped forward towards Yveni and Markov. Gil followed, and Paole, wondering what the hell was happening, went behind him. He found Sofia talking urgently to Markov, Yveni listening grimly. Paole only caught the end of the conversation.

"...force you into surrendering."

"What's happening?" Paole asked Gil.

"Sofia's Seen that the Karvin troops have invaded that town. They're planning to take citizens hostage to make me surrender to them."

"They'll ambush him as soon as he enters the town," she confirmed.

"I don't have a choice but to give myself up," Yveni said.

"Don't go in!" Paole shouted. "Are you mad?"

"Then they'll kill the hostages," Sofia said. "It's already too late to stop them."

"Are you sure?" Yveni asked. "What about Juen?"

"Let me ask him."

She whipped her mount and raced back to the waiting group.

"Yveni, you *can't* go in," Paole insisted.

"Wait," Markov said, rubbing his chin. "Your Grace, it's risky...but this could be what you need to prove Konsatin's perfidy."

"Are you suggesting I let them take me prisoner?"

"And be rescued. But I can't guarantee we could save you."

"No!" Paole yelled at them. "You're insane. What's to stop them cutting his throat on the spot? Or killing the townsfolk anyway?"

“Nothing,” Gil said.

Yveni shook his head. “No, they won’t kill me. I’ll be their surety until they reach the castle. We outnumber them.”

Gil frowned at him. “I agree with Paole. It’s too damn risky.”

Sofia was on her way back, Juen hot on her heels. “He’s Seen same as me,” she said as she brought her horse to a halt near them.

“How many troops?” Markov asked. “And if His Grace is captured, what then?”

Sofia and Juen hurriedly consulted. “A hundred or so soldiers. We See soldiers left on guard in the town, but no one killed or hurt.”

“Do you See if communications have been controlled by our people between here and the castle?”

Another quick discussion. “We think so. It’s not clear.”

Markov grunted. “I can see how we can make this work, but I think it puts you at grave risk, Your Grace.”

“My life or the townsfolk’s? No choice.”

“Except if Konsatin wins, they’re in danger anyway,” Paole said. “Yveni, you can’t.”

“They don’t know we know. They think we’ll be taken by surprise, but we won’t be. Markov, if we had troops in position to surround the town, and our mind controllers ready to cause confusion as soon as the Karvi left...”

“Let me think on it, Your Grace.”

“Yveni, please? Don’t do this.”

Yveni pursed his lips. “Excuse me, Commander. Paole, come with me.”

He walked his horse off the road a way, and Paole followed. “I have to do this.” Yveni used his dark eyes to plead. “What kind of duc would I be if I sacrificed my own people for my safety?”

“A live one for a start. Markov said he can’t guarantee you’d be rescued. Sofia didn’t say if you would be either.”

“I know. You said yourself I have amazing luck.”

“Which could run out at any time,” Paole snapped. “You’re letting that bastard manipulate you.”

“No, I’m manipulating *him*. Think about it. When word gets out what his troops have done, Konsatin’s finished. We have two reporters from Nukin with us, remember?”

“Are they planning to stand between you and the Karvi guns?”

“I doubt it.”

“And what if Konsatin orders you shot out of hand?”

“They won’t do that in the town. Yes, I could be killed. You knew that before we left.”

“I didn’t know you planned to throw yourself at your enemy like this!”

“Neither did I. Paole, I love you dearly, but this isn’t up for discussion. This is my job, like it or not. You can’t tell me how to govern, and this kind of decision is for me and Markov. Not you.”

Yveni stared steadily at him, leaving no room for argument, and clearly not prepared to move at all on this.

Paole clenched his jaw, angry and worried. “So this is how it will be, if I stay with you?”

“I hope I wouldn’t give you so much cause to worry, but yes. My job, my decisions. I will be duc, not you.” He bowed his head. “Forgive me.”

“If you die...”

“You won’t be alone.” Yveni looked up. “You’ll never be alone again, whatever happens to me.”

“You’re not *allowed* to die.”

“Then that’s settled. I have to go back.”

“I know.”

Yveni patted his hand and, turning his horse around, rode back to the others. Paole couldn’t make himself move yet, but he would. He had to, for Yveni’s sake.

They had to act quickly. Gil confirmed, by dint of climbing a nearby hill, that the road beyond Teinemel was clear. Markov sent the civilians on horseback—including, to Yveni’s relief, Paole—to the rear of the foot soldiers, and gave their mounts to soldiers who fanned out through the countryside and went the long way around the town to take up position on the far side. He left a hundred foot soldiers to form a barrier to the Karvin troops they’d encountered near Nukin. Four hundred more followed the horsemen as discreetly and quickly as possible, with the hope of commandeering more horses from the farms in the area.

A wall surrounded the town, as they did many towns in the duchy. This gave Yveni’s force an advantage in that there were only so many entrances and exits, but it meant they were certainly being observed. Yveni and Markov, as well as the officers, had to act as if nothing was out of the ordinary, but since most of the troops would not be expected to pass through the town, they could wait at the town gate as if expecting to receive orders. This would prevent the Karvin troops escaping on the near side of the town, and any that tried to leave on the far side, would be ambushed.

Sofia and Juen fed them as much information as they could, as the image of the future became clearer. They both foreSaw Yveni leaving as a captive, but safely, in the company of around a hundred Karvin soldiers, and the townsfolk unharmed. They Saw a battle between the Sardelsans and the Karvi, but the outcome wasn’t clear at all. Neither of them foreSaw a fight in the town. Yveni’s orders were to ensure the safety of civilians at all times, but there could be casualties whatever he said.

They left it the full hour and then some before moving slowly down the road towards the town. The soldiers forming the ambush had less than four kilometres to travel and should be close to their position, even travelling covertly as they needed to.

Yveni sent a prayer to the gods and to his parents' spirits to guide him as he approached the town wall. Yveni couldn't tell from Markov's intent expression what he was thinking, but the man was military to the core. Nothing ever distracted him, not even the thought of a new grandchild. Yveni hoped he'd live to see the baby. He hoped Paole and the others would be safe. He really hoped Paole would forgive him for what Yveni had to do.

There were far more sentries on the town walls than any respectable town in peacetime would maintain, though none of them were in uniform. As they passed through the town's heavy wood and iron gate, the silence hit him like a blow. A town this size should have rung with the sounds of commerce, trades, people living and working. There was nothing.

Once those on horses passed through the gate, a commotion started up behind them, and suddenly uniformed men surrounded them with rifles at the ready. "Move forward, Your Grace." The speaker seemed to be an officer, but it was hard to tell in these anonymous uniforms. Damn Konsatin and his mercenaries.

Yveni pretended he had no idea what was going on. "And who the hell are you? Why are you aiming weapons at me? Lower them immediately!"

"You're under arrest, Vicont. Cooperate, or these people will die." Behind him, soldiers appeared, holding pistols to the heads of twenty or so townsfolk, all women. "Dismount."

"This is outrageous!"

"Dismount or start watching the women die, Vicont."

"What about my men?"

"We only have orders to arrest you. They don't make any trouble, and no one will be killed."

Yveni turned to Markov. "You're ordered not to make any attempt to rescue me, Commander."

"But Your Grace..."

"No, that's my final word. Those are my strict orders and anyone who disobeys is a traitor. The regent wants my company so badly, let him have me. May Sardelsa prosper!"

Markov bowed his head. That was probably overdoing it, but better that than the other way.

Yveni dismounted and soldiers immediately seized him and bound his arms behind him. "Do you have to be so rough?" he complained in a deliberately petulant tone. "I'm cooperating." Let them think him an effete noble.

"Shut up, Your *Grace*. Move him."

They dragged him, stumbling, along the street towards the town square. He saw other soldiers but not a single civilian. He hoped Sofia's Sight was accurate and that the town wasn't full of corpses. So far things had gone to her prediction, and he'd heard no shots or anguished cries. Provided Markov didn't give the Karvi any reason to kill him, all they had to do was keep him at bay. Or so they thought.

They put him in the back of a filthy cart, an unnecessarily humiliating touch—there was only one likely source for that bit of malice—and drove him through the town. As he passed, more soldiers began to pour out of the houses around the square and the surrounding streets. Most remained behind him on foot. Only a dozen on horseback flanked the cart or rode ahead. They clearly didn't expect an attack to come from the front. Yveni kept a smile off his face. He still had a fight ahead of him.

The road out of the town looked utterly peaceful, lined with trees through which the sun shone in speckled beauty. No sign of the hundreds of soldiers, he hoped and prayed, waited for them. The Karvin troops moved along at a fast march, clearly in a hurry to take Yveni to the castle. He suspected they'd pick up more horses or ditch the foot soldiers soon so they could make greater speed. He hoped his soldiers would—

The deafening crack of a rifle rent the air, and the lead rider fell silently sideways off his horse. The riderless horse bolted as, suddenly, gunshots came in all directions. Yveni threw himself flat against the boards and prayed no one decided a dead vicont might be worth something to the regent. The horse pulling the cart bucked and for a moment, Yveni feared he'd be trapped in a runaway vehicle, but the animal quickly stilled. A mind controller must have seen the danger, thank the gods.

The thunderous noise ceased almost as suddenly as it had begun. The silence that followed, he realised as sounds began to filter in, resulted from his own temporary deafness. He didn't dare lift his head until he heard a voice with a Sardelsan accent say, "Let's get you out of this, Your Grace," and he looked up to see a smiling young soldier, holding his hand out to help him sit.

The soldier cut him free in moments. Around the cart lay carnage, dozens of dead soldiers sprawled on the road and beside it. The air reeked of gunpowder and blood. "How many of our men did we lose?" he asked.

"Not one, Your Grace."

"Any left alive on their side?"

"Not sure yet. Will you step down?"

He accepted the help, and shook his hands and arms to start the blood flowing. "What about the rest of our people? And the town?"

A young officer came forward and saluted him. "My orders were to send a squad back to assist, Your Grace."

"Then by all means, Lieutenant, please do."

The soldiers ushered him off the road into cover a hundred metres or so away, gave him a camp chair to sit on and kept him under guard. It was coming up to sunset. His role, for the moment, was over, and the mopping up he had to leave to the professionals. He hoped they'd hurry.

Paole found it hard to remain passive as men waving rifles drove Markov and his soldiers back through the town gates. Yveni was a prisoner now, and Paole had to trust in a plan which he didn't like and didn't believe would work. Markov sat grimly on his horse as the wait went on. The silence made it worse, in a way. He'd have liked some clue that things were moving.

Was that gunfire? Markov tensed, and Sofia reached for Gil's hand.

The distant cracks stopped, but still nothing happened. The silence stretched, and Markov did nothing, said nothing. Why was it taking so long?

More gunfire, much closer, and shouting on the other side of the town walls. "What's going on?" Paole snapped at Markov.

"I don't know. Please be quiet, Paole."

Silence, and more waiting. As dusk fell, the town gate rose suddenly, and a soldier waved a Sardelsan flag from the sentry point. Another walked through the gate. "Long live Sardelsa," he cried. "Long live Vicont Yveni!"

Soldiers cheered, Markov grinned and Gil threw his arms around Sofia's neck. Paole hugged her too, since she'd undoubtedly saved Yveni's life that day.

"What happens now?" he asked Gil.

"Ask Sofia, she's the seer."

"Well?"

"The Karvi surrender and we'll go into the town," she said, Juen nodding agreement.

Her prediction proved true. Markov's men poured through the gate, while the rest of them waited. Twenty minutes later, the mayor came out and invited all the civilians to enter the town, while food and water was brought out for the remaining soldiers. Paole found Yveni waiting for them in the square, sitting in a chair on the stone dais, holding court and talking to the residents. Markov was nowhere to be seen, but Yveni was under guard. No one was taking any chances.

The mayor invited Gil, Sofia and Paole up to the dais where Yveni, arm around Paole's waist and Sofia's shoulders, introduced them to the crowd as his Uemirien saviours. They were roundly cheered, much to Paole's surprise. The townspeople were in feverish mood, wanting to work off a lot of anger and relief. As the councillors escorted Yveni's group to the mayor's house for supper, beer barrels were wheeled out into the square, and music struck up. There'd be a party in the town that night.

"I'm starving," Yveni confessed. "It's just hit me."

"Be grateful you can still feel the need," Paole said, more gruffly than he intended.

Yveni took his hand and stared up into his face. "You have the hardest part, waiting."

"Aye. Come and let them feed you."

Paole tugged his young lover towards the dining room where the other guests were filing in, but they'd taken only a few steps when Yveni yanked his hand free. "There's Markov," he said, pointing to the doorway. "I need to speak to him and the mayor. Sorry."

Paole let him go with a sigh, watching as Yveni took Markov aside for a whispered briefing, before speaking to the mayor. Then he and Markov disappeared, while the mayor made his excuses and asked everyone to begin their meal. Gil looked at the empty place at Paole's side and took a chair next to it. "Left you again?"

"Heirs to the throne make very troublesome lovers, I think."

Gil glanced at Sofia, who smirked. "But they make up for it in youthful energy."

"The boy never stands still long enough for me to enjoy it."

"I'd console you by saying things will be different once he's back home, but his father probably worked himself into an early grave and so will his son, unless you stop him. We're counting on you, Paole."

Paole grunted. He'd have to catch Yveni first before he could slow him down.

He learned more about what had happened prior and during the occupation, how the mayor had returned to find his town under the control of the Karvin troops. The indignation about what the regent had attempted was universal, and the reporters had already sent stories back to Nukin on the drama. Would it have any effect on their success? Paole didn't know. He wished Yveni would come back. He didn't like him out of his sight longer than necessary. Not here with all those Karvin soldiers lurking.

When Yveni returned, he spoke to the mayor and came to his place beside Paole, giving him a smile. Paole did his best to look unconcerned by the length of Yveni's absence.

Yveni tapped his glass to gain the guests' attention.

"My friends, I thought it would save time if I told you what was happening all together. We have twenty Karvin soldiers in custody. A hundred and thirty were killed in battle. I'm glad to report we lost no Sardelsan soldiers, and the only civilian injury was an old man knocked into a wall by one of the Karvi. He's been treated and will make a full recovery. Praise to the gods for their mercy."

The guests piously murmured assent.

"The Karvi in our control have been questioned. There are five hundred of their fellows still in the country, but we've accounted for a hundred of them near Nukin. I've just spoken to the regent by telephone and informed him that Commander Markov and I are coming to the castle to charge him with conspiracy to murder, treason and insurrection, among other crimes. He, uh, hung up on me."

Paole grinned as a titter of nervous laughter ran around the room.

"My friends, I must continue towards the castle and take the Margrave Konsatin into custody. He's plotted to kill me, and today, threatened the lives of the good people of this town. He's unfit to be regent, and in front of you I formally revoke my oath of allegiance to him. I ask you all to instead pledge loyalty to

the duchy and its lawful head, whoever that turns out to be. I shall be asking the cabinet to appoint a new regent as soon as I can make contact with all of them. I've just spoken to Lord Timur and informed him of the situation. He's pledged his support for me."

He took a sip of wine and smiled at Paole again before continuing.

"Communications with the castle are under my control, and we're taking steps to control communications outside the duchy. However, within the duchy, you can all speak freely to your friends and relatives. I urge you, whether by telegram or telephone, to spread the word of my return and of Konsatin's crimes. I don't want a civil war. I do want civilian support. I want *your* support." He lifted his wine glass. "To Sardelsa!"

"To Sardelsa!"

The last thing Yveni did before he retired for the day was to calmly inform the mayor that he wished to share a bedroom with his lover. The poor man had had so many shocks that day Paole doubted the significance of the request even registered.

Once out of the public eye, Yveni wilted. "Gods, I'm shattered. I think I could sleep for a million years."

He struggled with his shirt and cravat until Paole took pity on him and undressed him like a child. He held up the coat Yveni had not worn that evening, though he'd carried it on his arm. "What on earth have you been doing? Rolling around in kardip dung?"

"The cart they tossed me into wasn't very clean. Is it ruined?"

"It needs cleaning."

"Ugh. I can't face it. Toss it on a chair and I'll deal with it in the morning. If I have to travel naked, so be it."

Paole grinned at the idea, and did his best to dust the poor coat off. It really did need cleaning though. He laid it aside as a bad job. "Want me to see if there's a bath available?"

"No. A cloth and basin's fine." He yawned. "Maybe in the morning."

"Lie down and let me tend to you."

"Are you sure? Aren't you angry with me?"

"Not any more, since you managed to survive *again*. But you need a wash."

Naked, Yveni threw himself on the bed. "Have at it, man. Don't expect me to return the favour because I can't move."

"I don't. Not tonight. Tell me we don't have to leave at the crack of dawn."

"No, we don't. Markov is moving troops as we speak so we don't end up with any more nasty little surprises. This time we travel *behind* the main body, and we'll catch up on horseback. Hopefully we'll have more civilians with us."

Paole fetched a washcloth and basin of hot water, still amazed by the luxury of having it on tap, which he'd never seen, even in Karvis. He wrung out the cloth and wiped Yveni's face. "Aren't you worried about taking civilians with you?"

"The greater the support, the less likely Konsatin is to pull another stunt like today. I'm not saying it's impossible, but we're hoping to force the confrontation at the castle. That's if he doesn't flee, which would suit me just fine. He's still there now."

"And your sisters?"

Paole drew the cloth across Yveni's nipples, and stroked his neck with it. Yveni stretched and smiled up at him. "We don't know. Konsatin would gain nothing by harming them and he'll want to use them to bargain with, so I hope they're safe enough. Sofia and Juen are doing their best to sift through the images of the future but it's quite hard on them. So much is going on and it's uncertain. It's not like being handed a letter with it all laid out neatly. They did good work today. Everyone did. I'm so proud of them."

Paole paused in wiping Yveni's firm stomach. "Everyone but me." Yveni stared at him in confusion. "I let you down. I'm sorry."

"You didn't. You were worried about me. I was worried about you too."

"Yes, but I tried to stop you...and I was prepared to sacrifice a lot of civilians just to save you."

"People in the abstract don't matter as much as people in the particular. Paole, I don't think you're a monster. This isn't much fun for you."

Paole turned his attention to Yveni's long legs before he answered. "I suppose I should have thought about it more."

"I'm glad you're here. Not glad that you're in danger but having you by my side... Gods, I feel so privileged."

"I suppose I'm going to have to get used to what it means to be a duc's consort."

"Yes. Because you'd make a damn funny-looking duces." Yveni laughed as Paole threw the washcloth at his head. "Now, now, violence against the heir to the throne is a capital offence."

"Do your worst, Your Grace."

"Not tonight. I'll see what I can manage in the morning. Come to bed, my love."

Paole tucked Yveni firmly against him, but Yveni craved more contact than that, draping his legs over Paole, and not content until every possible centimetre of his skin was touching him. A reminder, if any were needed, that while Yveni was brave and determined and clever, he was yet barely a man full-grown, and new to this as Paole was himself.

"Your friends worry you'll kill yourself with overwork," he ventured.

"I thought they might. Gil is certain Father's stroke was the result of all the stress over the betrothal, and the cabinet arguments before that." Yveni kissed Paole's right nipple, nuzzling against his chest as

Mathias the foal might have done. "Father was alone for many years after my mother died. Grief was the worst strain on him. I'll have you at my side, I hope."

"Will you let me rein you in? You didn't today."

A long silence. Paole had crossed from the personal into his lover's public role, and he knew that side barely at all. Too easily could he offend here.

"Our family has always married nobility. People who've run their own estates, been part of the government. Explanations about what we do...aren't needed."

"You know what I am."

"Yes, I do," Yveni said quickly, "and I love you for that. It's no fault in you, Paole. It's me. I should have explained. This is much easier for me than you. I've trained for it all my life."

"I don't want to hinder you, boy."

Yveni bit him in reproach for that word, and Paole rubbed his sore skin, accepting it. "You're no hindrance. We'll talk, I promise. I'm just so tired right now."

Paole cupped his head and pressed it closer to him. "Sleep. We'll have time later."

And it was his duty to make sure there was. He might not be a lord, but he'd match his vicont where it mattered. That, he promised himself.

The long lie-in Paole had hoped for didn't eventuate. A knock on the door woke them at dawn—Gil, with word from Markov. "Our troops have engaged the mercenaries near Lihle. They've contained them, but there have been losses."

Paole put his arm around Yveni's waist, feeling his lover's pulse speed up. "Heavy?" Yveni asked.

"Fifty or so. The wounded are being taken to Lihle because there's an infirmary there."

"I should go and help," Paole said.

Gil shook his head. "I think they can manage. And I doubt it's the last fight we'll see."

"Sofia?"

Gil shrugged. "She's receiving images of battle but she can't place them. The castle appears in some, not others. Juen's reporting the same thing. But some good news—Markov sent word back that Sardelsan troops are in control of the border. He's given orders that mercenaries can leave but not enter. He thought it better than tying up troops in detaining them."

"Agreed. I better get up, I suppose."

Paole quietly groaned but Gil held up his hand. "No, rest, lad. That's the news. The route is clear but Markov wants to make sure the road to Lihle and beyond is secured. He thinks you should push through to the castle today and not stop in Lihle."

"If that's his advice, I accept it. No one's heard from Konsatin? Any movement there?"

"None reported. We have troops there already. The castle's in lockdown. I'm sure we'll hear if Konsatin attempts to leave."

"Then send word to Markov that Konsatin can be allowed to leave the duchy for his home, but not to travel elsewhere in Sardelsa or to any other destination. My sisters must not be removed from Sardelsa."

"I'll tell him. Want your breakfast sent up?"

Yveni nodded. "Please. Thanks, Gil."

"You said I was your lieutenant. Just doing my job." He grinned and left.

"So what does that make me?" Paole asked as he bore Yveni down to the bed and kissed him.

"Aide-de-camp? Best friend and supporter?" Yveni put his arms around Paole's neck. "Indispensable companion, I think. We'll be at the castle tonight, looks like."

"So you'll confront Konsatin then?"

"Hmmm, doubt it. He's let other people do his dirty work so far. I'm worried he'll use my sisters as hostages. Not sure what I'll do if he does."

Yveni fell into contemplation, and Paole realised for the moment, he was far from his lover's thoughts. So he held him and waited, and when Yveni came back to him, Paole kissed him and reminded himself that he would always come second to Sardelsa in Yveni's attentions. Could one be jealous of an entire country? Was there any point?

By midmorning, all their party were up. The talk over tea was of the battle at Lihle and the general uproar in the country fed by the newssheet reports, and the rapid spread of reports through the telephone system. Yveni remarked wryly that his father had never thought it would be used in insurrection. Popular opinion was solidly in favour of the returning heir, though criticism of Konsatin was muted.

"How can they agree with what he did yesterday?" Paole asked.

"They don't, most likely," Gil said. "But Yveni's not overthrown him yet. If he loses, Konsatin's shown himself to be ruthless. Would you like to be the printer whose newssheet accused him of treachery, if he remains in power?"

"Politics makes my head hurt."

Yveni laughed and rubbed Paole's arm in sympathy. "And mine, sometimes."

The news of the soldiers' deaths had depressed Yveni for a while, so his buoyant mood now surprised Paole. He thought Yveni would be more worried, but when he had a chance for a private word with Gil and asked him, Gil hadn't been surprised. "Things are moving. He's been waiting all his life for a real role, and two years to tackle Konsatin. One way or another, in a very short time, he'll know his future."

"Does Sofia foresee his death?"

Gil looked at him, expression sombre. "Not in the next four days." Which wasn't as reassuring as it might have been, but Paole would get no better answer.

After all the exciting and worrying news of the morning, the journey they began just before noon was an anticlimax. The party travelling with them had swelled by thirty—civilians determined to fight along Yveni to bring him to the throne. Konsatin had made a lot of people in Teinemel very angry. But any actual fighting had, for the moment, finished. As their group cantered along the well-made road towards Lihle, Paole noted no signs of the earlier battle. Until, of course, one realised the occasional gashes on the trees were from bullets, and the dark marks on the road and grass were blood.

Following Markov's advice, most of their group didn't go through Lihle, though Yveni and Paole did, taking a small escort. Yveni made a quick visit to the infirmary to enquire after the wounded and to thank them for their sacrifice. The dead soldiers were to be buried in the town's graveyard and Yveni promised to return to attend a proper memorial once Konsatin was dealt with. He was quiet for a good hour after he rejoined the others.

What did it feel like to know men had died for one's ambitions? To look at a young soldier who'd just had an arm amputated at the elbow, and to know you'd been the cause of it? Paole wanted to ask, but it wasn't the time, and Yveni wouldn't thank him for it later, most likely. This was new for Paole, having to judge what hurt or offended someone he cared about. Most of his life, he'd only been concerned with avoiding a beating or worse. Old Mathias had been an easygoing soul, impossible to offend, and Paole had been as frank with him as he'd dare be with any master. Even with Yveni in the early days, he'd never guarded his tongue or his temper. But now...if he pressed his lover too hard, put too much stress on him when he needed to concentrate or to make hard decisions, Paole could do irreparable harm. He'd have to learn diplomacy, though he didn't know who could teach him, since Gil and Sofia were as blunt and plain as Paole himself.

Perhaps Yveni would teach him, but there was no time for that here. Paole would have to guard his mouth and his manners, and hide his feelings until Yveni was safely back in the castle. Only then could he judge if a life as a consort offered him anything to replace what he'd given up.

Chapter Twenty-Six

The castle came into view a little after four in the afternoon, a majestic and graceful presence rising up out of the flat fields around it. Yveni pulled up his horse and drew a deep breath as Gil reined in his mount alongside him. “A fine sight, isn’t it?” Gil remarked. “One I thought I might never see again.”

Standards flew from all the tall towers, though Yveni scowled to see the Enholt flags scattered here and there. Konsatin had a damn nerve. “Where did Markov say he’d meet us?”

“By the Stag Inn. Are you ready for this, lad?”

“Never readier.” Yveni nodded at Gil, and at Paole, intently watching him. “Forward!”

Nearly as many civilians as soldiers surrounded the Stag Inn a half mile from the castle, and they cheered Yveni soundly as he rode up. He stood in the saddle and waved to the well-wishers, keeping his distance. Commander Markov spurred his horse and rode over at a gallop, saluting Yveni as he came to a halt.

“Markov, greetings. How goes it?”

“I’m happy to report we’ve taken prisoner what we believe are all the remaining mercenaries. So far as we can tell, the castle is now only guarded by three hundred Enholt troops. We’re ready to make the final assault at your command, Your Grace.”

“Wait. As soon as you do that, Konsatin will use my sisters as hostages. We have to get them out of there first.”

“How?” Markov frowned. “When we attack, he’ll do as you say.”

“Yes. Which is why we sneak in. Gil, Sofia? This is where I need you. Commander, we’ll want a quiet place to talk.”

“Inside, Your Grace. We’ve taken it over with the kind cooperation of the owners.”

“Remind me to thank them personally. Lead on, please. Paole? Would you like to join us?”

His lover started, as if the invitation hadn’t been expected. “Won’t I be in your way?”

“No. Not you.” Yveni tried to infuse his tone with tenderness. Paole had been sidelined since they’d left the ship, and Yveni didn’t want him to feel unwanted.

They entered the cool, dark interior of the inn, the smell of stale beer and sweat pungent after the fresh air outside. An elderly man and woman came out to greet them, bowing respectfully. “Your Grace,” the man said. “Welcome to our inn.”

Yveni bowed his own head. “Thank you. Sorry for the inconvenience, sir.”

“No matter, Your Grace. It’s an honour.”

“Honour or not, you’ll be compensated for the lost business. Hopefully we’ll dispose of this little local difficulty and you can present a bill to the castle. Some of your fine ale too. I’ve missed good Sardelsan beer.”

“Then let me fix you right up, Your Grace.” The woman gave him a little bobbed curtsy.

Yveni smiled. “Ah, you know the way to a man’s heart, my lady. Thank you.” A blush coloured her aged cheeks and the old people rushed off to attend to their orders.

They sat down at one of the tables, and Markov smiled at him. “You might want to watch the beer, Your Grace. It’s a potent brew.”

“And how would you know that, Commander? Surely you don’t drink on duty.”

“Even for you, Your Grace, I’m not on duty all hours of the day. Now, to business. What plan do you have?”

“The walls of the castle, and the castle itself, have a secret network of tunnels. Originally they were built for servants to use, but they were extended during the civil war. They’ve fallen out of use, but my sisters and I discovered them. I, uh...researched them extensively.” Gil gave him a grin for that. “They were useful in avoiding certain huntmasters bent on tanning my bottom from time to time. They were also a way for my sisters and me to move between each other’s rooms. I’m certain Serina would never have told Konsatin about them.”

“Well, *I* knew nothing of them, so I’m sure none of the mercenaries or the Enholt troops do. Though when this is over, Your Grace, you and I need to have a little chat about such matters for benefit of castle security.”

Yveni refused to be abashed—secrecy on the subject of the tunnels was ingrained in all his family, and he had hoped not to reveal their existence at all. “In good time. So what I propose is this—a few of us, perhaps those of us here, should go in and take my sisters out in the night, while your men distract attention at the front.”

“Agreed. But I think we can do better than that.”

Yveni listened as Markov outlined his ideas. They seemed sound enough to him, and though he was no military tactician, none of the other listeners raised any concerns. He turned to his lover. “Paole, you understand I’ll have to go in myself. I can’t draw sufficiently accurate plans.”

“I know,” Paole said, mouth turned down unhappily. “But I want to come with you. You’ll need muscle.”

“Agreed. I think three others apart from myself—Sofia, perhaps you should stay to assist the army?”

She turned to Gil. “Husband?”

“I think the fewer people the better, for speed’s sake. What do you foreSee?”

Sofia concentrated. “I See...yes, Serina and Olana outside the castle.”

“So that means it’ll succeed?” Markov asked.

“It means it’s a possible future,” she explained. “I can’t promise it will definitely happen, or that it will happen as a result of this. It’s most likely to happen, but the future can change. Like me Seeing Yveni dead when Konsatin plotted against him—he changed that by escaping.”

“Ah. Very well. Then we do it the old-fashioned way. I’m not sure we need Master Paole—”

“I do,” Yveni insisted, taking Paole’s hand under the table.

“Very well. Then we put it into effect at nightfall,” Markov said.

Yveni shook his head. “No, later. Wait until people are asleep and servants aren’t in the halls.”

“Good point. Your beer’s coming.”

Yveni smiled at the woman bringing over a tray with a jug and beer mugs. “Perfect timing, my lady. Thank you.”

She set the tray down. “Blessings on Your Grace. We prayed for your safe return and mourned when they said you died.” She gave Gil and Paole a quick, suspicious glance. “They said it was Uemiriens what done it.”

“A mistake. I owe my life to them. I hope those who left will return, because I have many friends in that country.”

“Yes, Your Grace. Thank you.” She curtsied again and left quickly.

Sofia sighed. “It’ll take more than kind words to convince your people, Yveni.”

“Sadly true. I know the truth of it, though. Paole, let me pour you your first Sardelsan beer, and Commander, let’s refine this plan. There won’t be room for error.”

Paole’s hands would not stay dry not matter how many times he wiped them on his trousers or his shirt. Yveni, damn him, was as calm and cheerful as if he carried out rescue missions every night of his life. The waiting around had been torture. The army had moved into position, cutting the castle off from the outside world. No contact had been made between those on the inside and those laying siege. As darkness fell, and the area around the castle gate became a sea of flaming torches, outshining the electrical lights on the castle towers, it looked almost festive to Paole’s eyes. The castle wall remained in darkness, and nothing could be heard or seen of the residents. He thought it a very strange situation, and a very strange reaction, but then what did he know of margraves and regents and castles? Nothing. Kind of Yveni to indulge him by letting him go with them tonight, but Markov had been right—Paole didn’t add anything that the others couldn’t provide just as well.

The lights held by the soldiers were intended to distract the guards on the wall. An hour before midnight, Paole and the other three slipped into a tiny archway four hundred metres or so from the main gate. Inside was pitch dark but Yveni lit a lamp to reveal a narrow, low-ceilinged tunnel. “Sorry,” he whispered, as Paole crouched. “Opens out farther on.”

Paole grunted quietly and kept his head down as they crept single-file along what felt like kilometres of tunnels. Yveni moved with assurance, which made Paole feel better about the whole thing. At several points, he stopped before a wooden panel or more obvious door and whispered to Markov, who made careful notes before they moved on.

As promised, the ceilings lifted a little, even though the tunnel was no wider, as they entered the residential section within the castle. They'd been warned that only these doors separated the tunnels from many rooms and corridors in the castle, and their voices and footsteps would carry. They walked slowly and with great care, and spoke as little as possible. Paole imagined Yveni as a child, light and quick, using these as his secret highway to gain a little privacy from the constant attentions of servants and even his friends. Had he and his sisters enjoyed the joke of suddenly appearing where they should not be? Yveni was so serious now, so mature. Hard to imagine him being a prankster.

Yveni stopped and held up his hand. "Serina's room," he mouthed, indicating a panel. He pointed along the tunnel. "Olana, next one, same side."

Their plan couldn't guide them now, for Yveni didn't know if Serina still slept in her old room or if anyone would be with her. That was why they all carried guns. Even though he'd learn how to handle and shoot firearms onboard the ship, Paole hoped he'd not have to test his skills this night. He didn't want to kill someone, or shoot one of his friends in the leg.

Yveni listened at the panel for some time, before signalling he was going in. Paole held his breath as the panel opened. From the room on the other side came faint lamplight, the kind he'd expect in a bedroom where someone was asleep. Yveni mouthed "wait" and crept through the doorway. Seconds later he was back and motioning them through, finger to lips to indicate they needed to be quiet.

The door emerged behind an artfully placed wardrobe, making it easy to check their path before they exposed themselves to danger. But there were no guards, and the four of them entered the bedroom without challenge.

In the dim light, the room appeared huge, twice the size of Mathias's entire cabin. A large bed stood in pride of place, and on it someone slept—and at the foot of it, on a narrow couch, another sleeper. Serina's attendant, most likely. Markov took up a position near the door, listening. Yveni motioned to Gil and pointed at the servant. Gil crouched and put his hand over the woman's mouth. She briefly struggled, but then clearly recognised him. He took his hand away and repeated the finger-to-lips gesture. Yveni put his hand over his sister's mouth and gently shook her. She took longer to waken, staring a little dazedly before she realised who he was. He took his hand away.

"By the gods...Yveni...Gil..." Her voice was a weedy, thin thing.

"Quiet, Serina darling. Where's Olana?"

"In her room. What are you doing?"

"Getting you out of here. Inie, can you fetch her clothes?"

The maid lit another lamp from theirs, raising the light a little, and went to the wardrobes, moving silently and quickly. A sensible woman. Good.

But Serina was whispering to Yveni, who frowned, and motioned to Paole. "She can't walk far," he said. "Could you carry her?"

"Of course. Get dressed, Your Grace, and leave the rest to me."

She smiled sweetly, but the brighter light now revealed how drawn and thin she was. Gil had said she only pretended to be sick, but this girl looked really ill. He used his gift, and to his horror, discovered she was starving, her body failing for want of sustenance. "Are you fasting, child?"

She jumped. "To make them think I'm sick," she murmured. "Or he was going to marry me and seize everything. I didn't know else what to do. Doctor Kardwil left. I had no one."

Yveni hugged her and whispered in her ear. The resilience of this family amazed Paole.

The maid dressed her mistress while the men all discreetly turned away, and then Paole came back and lifted Serina up. Much too light for a girl of her height. She'd come very close to death with her fakery. "Relax, my lady," he said. "You're safe."

She sighed. "You're nice."

"We have to go," Yveni whispered. "Markov, lock the door. Inie, you're coming with us. It's not safe otherwise."

"Yes, Your Grace."

Paole waited in the tunnel with his precious charge while the others, with Serina's maid, rescued the younger sister. Serina's dark eyes burned into him. "Are you a friend of Gil's?"

"And your brother's. How long have you not eaten properly?"

"Too long. I...forget. I just remembered I had to stop *him*. Did it work?"

"Yes, my lady, it did. You did well."

"It went on so long...and I thought Yveni was dead. I was all alone. Gil and Sofia..." A little sob escaped her. "I had to be brave. For Olana."

"You were. It's over. You're safe, sweetness."

She snuggled into his embrace and fell asleep. A wave of fierce protectiveness came over him, even more than he felt for Yveni. Yveni was strong and tall and fit. Serina was only a frightened child who'd suffered without help for so long. He knew what that felt like.

Yveni and the others came back in five minutes or so, with another woman and a young girl in tow. She seemed quite healthy and took after her brother startlingly in looks.

"He's so tall!" she whispered.

Gil grinned. "He's our one-man mountain. This way, dear."

They couldn't move as fast as before, because of the extra people and Paole's burden. Serina caused a panic when she woke and, confused, struggled and cried out. Paole clamped his hand over her mouth and

stared into her eyes until she settled. Yveni looked at him in approval and a little surprise, but said nothing, just signalled them to move on.

It felt like hours until they reached the door in the castle wall. As soon as they were in the open air, Markov gestured to the officer in charge of the waiting soldiers, and headed right back into the tunnel. Yveni only had time to kiss his youngest sister and whisper to her, and then he came to Paole. "Will you look after Serina until I come back?"

"With my life."

"I hope that won't be necessary. She needs Gil and Sofia, especially Sofia."

"Aye. Good luck."

Yveni smiled and ducked inside the tunnel.

"Want me to take her?" Gil asked.

"No. Let's get them to a safe bed, and food and drink."

Olana kept staring at him. Paole dropped her a wink and she giggled. "I like you."

"Very good, Your Grace."

They took horses, Paole still holding Serina in his arms, back to the inn, where a room had been prepared for the two vicontes. Paole carried Serina upstairs to the bedroom, laid her on one of the beds and covered her carefully with a blanket, keeping hold of her hand. Olana and the two maids stood watchfully by. Gil had gone to fetch his wife.

The innkeeper's wife fussed around them, apparently determined to shoo the men away but Paole would not be moved until Sofia arrived. "Soup, mistress, thin if you please. And tea with honey. The child has starved herself to save her sister and the duchy."

The woman clucked, her objections gone in an instant. "I have the very thing. I'll bring it up directly."

Paole left her to it and concentrated on the girl. Serina's eyes opened and she panicked a little before she saw him and smiled. "Are we safe?"

"Yes, sweetness. You, your sister, your brother, your friends. Out of the castle, out of danger." He didn't mention Yveni was back inside the castle as she didn't need the stress. "We're bringing you some soup, and then you can rest again."

"Just want to sleep now."

"I know, but a little food will do you good. Now Yveni's back, you need to be strong again."

"H-how...did you bring him back?"

"It's a long story and one he's itching to tell you. He's told me so much about you."

"Me?"

"Oh yes."

She smiled again, but it pained him to see how it threw the thin planes of her face into relief.

Sofia and Gil arrived as the food did. Olana ran to Sofia and squealed with joy. “Oh, my darling, darling girl,” Sofia said as she embraced the child. “Where’s... gods, is Serina sick? Serina?”

Gil took his wife’s arm and led her over to the bed. “She’ll be fine, but she needs to eat. The good lady behind you has the means. Paole...”

Paole gladly surrendered his place, though Serina followed him with her eyes. “Are you coming back?”

“Absolutely. Let Sofia feed you, and I’ll see you in the morning.” He picked up her hand and kissed it. “Good night, my princess.”

She actually giggled, a weak, tired sound but it lifted his heart. Olana gave him a hug. “Come back soon, Master Giant.”

He bowed. “Yes, my lady. But now I have to go. Gil?”

“Yes. Sofia, girls, stay here, stay safe. I’ll bring Yveni and Paole in a few hours.”

The two of them went downstairs. “Breaks my heart to see her like that,” Gil said, quickly wiping his eye. “She was a great beauty.”

“Will be again, if we can feed her. How long before anything happens?”

“At least an hour.”

“Is Yveni going to ask Konsatin to surrender?”

“No point. If he hasn’t challenged all these soldiers at his very doorstep, a request won’t make him change his mind. He probably thinks we won’t move until morning, so we’ll have the element of surprise. I hope,” Gil added with a wry grin. “I’m not a tactician.”

“You know more than me.” Paole looked back towards the stairs. “This family has guts.”

“Aye, which is why I’d have laid down my life for their father, blessed be his memory. Arkady was brave and true and intelligent, like his children. Konsatin’s not fit to lick their boots.” His lip curled. “Does it make me evil to wish that he loses his life this night?”

“If it does, it makes two of us.” He clapped Gil on the shoulder. “Come on, my friend. We have a vicont to find.”

Had his father ever been in this position? Yveni suspected not. Having Serina and Olana safe was an immense weight off his shoulders, but seven hundred soldiers were prepared to lay down their lives for him, and if he gave the wrong order, every one of them might just have to. Markov thought the chances of victory were high, because they vastly outnumbered the guards in the castle, but Yveni knew enough of history to know there was no such thing as a certainty in battle.

But the time had come to bring the crisis to a head. Markov’s troops were ready inside the tunnels, and the mind controllers had been infiltrated close to the gate guards’ position. All they needed was the

signal. Paole and Gil stood at his side, loyal and calm and supportive. Yveni wished they were far from here, but was still incredibly grateful for their presence.

He raised his arm. A discreet ripple ran along the line of soldiers, while he held his breath. Paole put his hand on Yveni's shoulder, warm, comforting. Perhaps he was weak for allowing it, but he did.

The crack and bang was louder than anything he'd heard in his life, the whoosh of the explosion making him rock back on his heels. A huge shout went up and guns blazed from the ground forces laying cover for those forcing the gates now the locks had been blown. Fire was briefly returned from the walls, but then the guns above fell silent—the mind controllers had confused the guards, and Markov's men should have overpowered them. Yes, so they had, for that was the Sardelsan standard being waved from the ramparts.

"Time to go," Yveni said.

The three of them ran for the exit. Farther ahead of them, unseen, Markov's men should have already entered the residence, seizing control and searching for Konsatin. Yveni and the others were to follow, to assist in searching if the regent evaded them.

Inside the tunnel, the sounds of gunfire and explosions were muted almost to nothing by the heavy walls. Yveni wished he could know how the battle went, but he had to trust that his soldiers could take control of the Enholt troops. He didn't seek the lives of those men, but he wanted them gone from his castle. It was up to them how much resistance they made.

"Yveni?"

He looked up, disbelieving his ears and eyes. "Konsatin!"

Konsatin, shocked as he was, stood with lamp raised, frozen in midstep. For a moment, Yveni thought he imagined the sight. He couldn't believe the man looked exactly as he had the last time Yveni had seen him. The same sleek hair, disarmingly handsome features, the studied elegance of his clothes. Only the expression had changed, for instead of the easy smile, Konsatin's face bore a snarling grimace. The regent stared a little longer, then turned tail and bolted back up the tunnel.

"After him!" Yveni yelled in fury. The bastard wouldn't escape him that easily. Konsatin owed him a powerful revenge.

Faster and lighter, he could make better speed than either of the men behind him, so he saw Konsatin duck through a panel leading to the library. He had to hope the others would catch up with him, but he dared not lose Konsatin, now he realised the man knew about the tunnels.

When he emerged, he ducked instinctively as a bullet hit the wall near his head. He drew his own pistol, but Konsatin was on the run again, dashing along the polished wooden floors and fleeing through the far library doors. Damn. He'd had over two years to learn the secrets and layout of the residence and had put it to good use. Where were Markov's men?

Yveni chased Konsatin through the corridors and up to the first floor, where the guest bedrooms stood, and the music gallery. “Konsatin, stop!”

Another shot, and then shouts from below. The soldiers, thank the gods. “He’s up here!” he yelled. “The regent, first floor!”

He couldn’t stop to see if the soldiers had heard him. He pounded along the gallery and flung open the doors to the music room. The window was open, the curtains still moving. He dashed to it, looked out, and a bullet sent a chip of stone from the wall into his cheek, cutting it painfully. He wiped it with his sleeve and tried to see where the man had gone. It was too high to jump down from here. Konsatin had to be in one of the bedrooms. Yveni held his pistol at arm’s length, ducking down and moving along the balcony, trying each window and quickly peering in to spot Konsatin’s lamp.

One of the windows was locked. None of the others had been. He smashed a pane with his elbow and forced his way in. A shot that came far too close confirmed his guess. “Konsatin, you can’t win. Surrender and you can leave the duchy.”

“Never, you little shit.”

A flash of steel was his only warning, and if his reflexes had been the least bit slower, he’d have lost his hand. He threw himself at the wall to escape Konsatin’s lunge and grabbed a vase to hurl at the man, momentarily confusing him. It gave him enough time to dive at the light switch, and while Konsatin blinked, Yveni drew his own sword and aimed his pistol. “Stop now, or I’ll fire!”

Konsatin’s response was to shoot, his bullet scoring a white-hot line across Yveni’s hip. Yveni stumbled with the pain and shock, and Konsatin leapt, swinging his sword down with murderous intent. Yveni blocked, desperation overcoming the pain. He brought his pistol up but Konsatin slammed his sword hand down hard on Yveni’s wrist. The gun fired as it fell, but Yveni used the momentary distraction to punch Konsatin in the guts and kick him in the shins. The man grunted in pain, but still managed to avoid Yveni’s sword thrust, and deliver a blow of his own, bring his fist and sword hilt down so hard on Yveni’s shoulder it numbed his arm. Yveni barely kept hold of his sword but couldn’t lift it.

Konsatin grinned, sensing victory. Yveni lunged for the pistol, realising it was his only hope, but as his fingers curled over it, a sharp, sickening pain shot through him. He fired the gun, the bullet going off harmlessly into the skirting board. As he slumped forward, Konsatin withdrew his sword, increasing the fiery agony tenfold. The regent smashed the side of Yveni’s head with his fist, driving him flat to the ground, then put his booted foot in the small of Yveni’s back.

“Well now, Your Grace. Looks like I win the throne anyway.”

Cheek pressed to the floor, Yveni couldn’t look up at him. His vision whited in and out with the pain. “Serina...never marry,” he mumbled.

“Perhaps not, but there’s always Olana. I do have a contract to marry, you know. But first, I need to dispose of you properly, like I should have to begin with.”

Yveni saw movement in the doorway. "Good luck," he murmured.

Konsatin frowned. "What?"

"You'll...need it."

Konsatin hissed in irritation, then grunted in pain as a hundred and twenty kilograms of muscle slammed into him, threw him hard against the wall and then to the floor. Paole's massive fists pounded Konsatin's handsome face into a bloody mess, the sickening thuds travelling along the floorboards to Yveni's cheek, until Gil moved behind him and told him, "Don't kill him, Paole. We need him to hang. Yveni, are you...Paole!" Gil's voice went sharp with alarm. "Leave that bastard to me, Yveni's hurt!"

Paole dropped Konsatin with a thud, turned and knelt at Yveni's side. "Hey," Yveni whispered as Paole quickly checked his wounds.

"Shhh, sweetness. Let me help you." He lifted Yveni's shirt out of his trousers and sucked in a breath. Yveni wanted to reassure him but he was in too much pain to think.

"Get him to the infirmary, Paole. Outside, downstairs, to the left. Go, man!"

Paole rolled Yveni onto his back and picked him up, which hurt a lot. Paole's expression twisted with distress at Yveni's whimper.

He felt...cold, and light-headed, and Paole was carrying him again. That meant he was dying, didn't it? "Am I dying?"

"No, sweetness. Not tonight."

"Oh good."

For the second time that night Paole ran with someone precious in his arms, but Yveni was in a lot worse shape than Serina had been, and it would take more than soup and tea to fix it. He found soldiers on the landing. "Get out of my way, the vicont's injured!"

One of the men stepped quickly forward. "Follow me, I'll take you to the infirmary."

Grateful for the soldier's wits, he rushed carefully down the elegant stairs after the man. He hoped like hell that the fighting outside would not stop them, and that the infirmary had staff on hand. The bleeding his gift saw in Yveni's guts would take his lover's life if it was not stopped, and soon.

Gunfire still sounded in the huge castle precinct, confined to the area near the gate. Wounded and imprisoned soldiers lay or sat close to the infirmary building, but no one blocked Paole's path. As they entered the infirmary, the soldier escorting him bellowed, "The heir! The heir is hurt!"

Staff rushed out to see what was happening. Paole recognised the doctor who'd joined them as they waited outside the castle, the man who'd said he'd worked here but had been removed. Doctor Kardwil, the former physician to the ducal family.

"Help him," Paole demanded as the doctor looked at the blood soaking Yveni's lower back. "A sword thrust has sliced his left kidney."

The man opened his mouth to question him, and then realisation flooded his expression. “You can actually see it inside him, can’t you? That’s what His Grace meant.”

Paole nodded.

“Bring him into theatre, then scrub up. I need your help.”

A medic led him to the surgical theatre and directed him to lay Yveni face down on the table. Three other medics clustered round the boy, and Paole was hustled back. “Through there. Strip, wash, wear a mask.” Another medic pushed him towards swinging doors, through which he found a washroom with white linen shifts hanging on hooks.

The university infirmary in Horches had a similar facility so he worked out what was needed. He took off his bloodied shirt, wincing at the sight, and went to the sinks. Doctor Kardwil came in and began to do as Paole was, stripping his clothes and washing his hands thoroughly. “We were just about to take our first wounded,” Kardwil said. “I’d been sifting the injured and had only finished a few seconds before you came over.”

“Save Yveni or the soldiers will have been injured for naught.”

“I try to save everyone, my man.”

Thin gloves of a type Paole had never seen, and a mask over his face, meant he was finally clean and fit to be allowed into the theatre again.

Yveni still lay almost face down on the table, but the medics had been busy, and now his body lay draped with clean white cloths. The lad was unconscious, and a medic gave him air through an airbag, while another listened intently to the sounds of his lung and heart. Yveni’s clothes had been cut from him and thick dressings placed over the wound in his gut. A glass jar hung on a hook and a clear liquid dripped through tubing into his arm via a needle. Seeing all the equipment, the preparations, Paole stopped short. This was no healing he knew. What could he do here?

But Kardwil called to him. “Use that gift of yours and describe what you see.”

So Paole concentrated and tried his best to forget *whose* injuries he spoke of, whose blood spattered the dressings, whose pale face the airbag covered. Like Kardwil, he had to be calm, objective and observant. He reported which organs were damaged in what position, and as Kardwil worked with scalpels and clamps and forceps, Paole continued to describe what the doctor could not see, guiding his hands and instruments to the hidden bleeds, the unseen damage Konsatin’s damn sword had caused. Though the medics used equipment to monitor heart rate and blood pressure, Paole’s gift was a far more subtle tool, and Kardwil used his information for everything, rather than seeking reports from the medics. He sent one away, no longer needed, but the rest of the team worked together, calmly, efficiently. Yveni’s life force continued to shine, despite the horrible injuries Paole saw with his eyes and his gift.

The infirmary was far more modern than the one in Horches, and Yveni had spoken several times of Doctor Kardwil's skill. Would it be enough? In his atheist heart, Paole prayed to gods he didn't believe in that Yveni would survive, because if he didn't, he just didn't know what he'd do.

The surgery took nearly an hour. An agony for Paole, but as the medics wheeled Yveni away, and Kardwil insisted Paole come out and wash up again, the doctor smiled. "Never treated an injury of that kind that fast, my man. Can you stay? I have many wounded, and you'll speed things up. Your gift will mean the difference of losing men, or not."

"Of course. But I'm not trained."

"Doesn't matter. You're worth two medics to me, which means we can spare them to treat the less seriously wounded. Hurry, we have people waiting for our care."

"Yveni?"

"Will be fine. Concentrate on the task in hand, Paole, for you can do no more for him now."

So Paole did, and all through the rest of the night and into the morning, he worked beside Kardwil, acting as his eyes and spare hands, monitoring conditions, and in one case, telling him that there was no point in working on the soldier before them as his injuries had gone too far to save.

When the last man had left for recovery, and Paole and Kardwil washed up for the final time, he felt his exhaustion to his very bones. "How do you do it?" he asked the doctor.

"I don't have to very often. I could use you, Paole. We could learn so much from what you can tell us of what's happening in the body. Have you plans to stay?"

"I don't know. I haven't thought about it."

"Think about it. But find some rest first." Kardwil blinked as if waking up suddenly. "Oh. I don't know what's happening. Did we win?"

Paole had lost track of what was happening outside hours ago. "No idea. I guess we didn't lose, since no one's come in to interfere."

"True. Don't leave without speaking to me, I beg you. But leave our vicont to rest a little longer before you come in to see him. You saved his life, you know."

Paole flushed. "No, you did with your surgery."

"Man, I'm telling you, the speed and accuracy of treatment makes a difference, and he owes all to you. Now we have to make sure he doesn't ruin our work by getting an infection. Don't look so worried. We have excellent antibiotics here in Tuelwetin. He'll be fine."

Paole smiled, but the worry still gnawed at him. Kardwil told him to have someone make him some tea and if he could find nowhere better to sleep, he could grab a cot in the infirmary. Paole wanted to find his friends before he slept.

Outside, the bright sunshine shocked him, as did the peace. It was as if a storm had passed over, leaving no trace but wet stones.

“Paole!”

He turned, and grinned in relief to see Gil. “What happened to your arm?” He had a bandage wrapped around his forearm.

“Oh, I collided with someone’s knife, but it’s nothing. Yveni?”

“Alive. Kardwil says he’ll be fine, but...”

Gil touched his shoulder. “Then he will be,” he said gently. “Sofia’s at our old house over there. She’s set up cots and a field kitchen. Come. You look worn out.”

Paole followed him, too tired to ask about alternatives he didn’t want anyway. “The regent?”

“In custody. Lord Timur, the chief minister, is dealing with all that. You left Konsatin rather less handsome than before.”

“I wish I’d killed him.” Paole clenched his hands, remembering the give of the bastard’s flesh under his fists.

“No, you don’t, and neither will Yveni. He’s humiliated and all his intrigue is for naught. That’s a much worse punishment.”

“And who rules now?”

Gil smiled. “Sardelsa. Leave politics for the politicians. Today, the victors have earned their rest.”

Chapter Twenty-Seven

By the time Yveni could spend more than a few minutes a day awake, and without the deadening grip of heavy pain killers, he'd discovered that he'd lost nearly two weeks, during which time things had changed a great deal in the duchy. His first visitor was Lord Timur, first minister, and for now, the new regent. The man was quite gleeful as he made his report. "The Margrave Konsatin has been returned to Enholt in disgrace, along with the Enholt soldiers, and his brother the duc has been advised that if he strays beyond Enholt's borders, he will find a most hostile reception."

"Thought it better not to try him?" Yveni wished he could have this conversation in a chair, not a bed, and with a stronger voice, but Doctor Kardwil had told him it would be some time before he was up to that, before muttering something to one of the medics about the lad not knowing how lucky he was.

"Frankly, yes, given the nature of the evidence we had against him, and the political difficulties. The Council of Unity sanctioned the action, and has agreed to place Enholt on strict supervision. I hope you're not disappointed, Your Grace."

Yveni waved a weary hand. "So long as he's out of the duchy and has no claim on my sister."

"Oh no, he doesn't. Your Grace, I think the constitution might need amending to reject foreign regents and to give betrothed partners greater freedom."

"Agreed." He shifted in pain. "My sisters?"

"Both well, and soon to visit. I, ah, have restored Master Gil to his previous position, and his good wife. I believe it would be a healing thing for the duchy if the margrave's innovations were undone as soon as possible."

"Indeed. Gil agreed to stay?"

"After consideration, yes. He said, and I quote, 'I miss Uemire, but the hunting's better in Sardelsa.'"

Yveni grinned. "This is true. I want to see him. And I want to see Master Paole *now*. Why has he not been to visit, my lord?"

Timur coughed. "Er...he was, of course, constantly at your side while you recovered, Your Grace. I can't speak for his absence now. I haven't seen him in some time."

"Has he left the duchy?"

"No, no, nothing like that. I believe he's staying with Master Gil. Perhaps he'd know?"

"Perhaps." Yveni could order Paole brought to him. Could order that he not be allowed to leave the country. But to do that would be a gross violation not only of their trust, but Paole's right as a free man.

Waiting was an agony, but he needed to be patient a little longer, and hope Paole would come of his own will.

Damn, he wanted to be out of this bed. The minister waited for Yveni's instruction. Yveni tore his mind off Paole himself and onto the arrangements which needed to be made concerning him. "Speaking of Paole, there's another matter which the cabinet will have to agree upon..."

"Paole, wait!"

He turned and obediently stood still as Serina ran across the cobblestones to him. "Your Grace, what can I do for you?"

"Stop calling me 'Your Grace' for a start." She leaned up to kiss his cheek. "Where are you going?"

"Ah, I thought I'd take a horse and go herb collecting, if Gil can lend me a mount."

"Have you been to see Yveni? He asked after you again."

"Uh...no. Not yet."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm not ready."

"Can I come with you? Doctor Kardwil says I should take as much fresh air and exercise as I can cope with."

He assessed her. In the five weeks since the restoration, she'd made great progress, though she was still very thin and occasionally prone to panic and sudden mood swings. Sofia had taken her directly under her charge, and Olana had also designated herself as her sister's nurse. Paole wondered how the older vicontes had escaped their attention.

"If Sofia agrees," he said cautiously. "And you don't overdo it."

"I won't. Let's take a picnic."

It was more fuss than he wanted, but he couldn't deny this girl anything, and she knew it. Like brother, like sister, but then his heart contracted a little at the thought of Yveni, so he stopped thinking about it.

Sofia was quite content for Serina to go out under Paole's protection. Olana was off having a music lesson so they didn't have to worry about her being jealous of Serina spending time with the man Olana had something of a crush on. Gil gave Serina Yveni's mare, Ande, since the horse needed the exercise and she was a very well-mannered mount who wouldn't need a stronger hand to control her. Paole rode a big gelding that reminded him of Peni. He wondered if he could convince them to let him keep him when he went home.

Serina was content to ride in silence out into the woods near the castle. The place looked so peaceful now, though the damage from the brief but bloody battle could be detected if one knew where to look. The locks on the big wood and iron gate into the castle had been repaired, but the walls bore bullet chips here

and there, and in the centre of the yard, a statue of Grand Duces Elaini, the founder of Yveni's family line, had suffered damage from a poorly aimed bomb. She now gazed at her missing hand with a most irritated expression, but somehow Paole doubted she'd have let it slow her down in real life.

He took them to a favourite spot, a sunny glade by a pretty stream. Not the best area for herb collecting but he'd only used that as an excuse, and Serina liked the place, so he was content. He helped her down from the mare, and laid out their blanket and cushions. She insisted on acting as his serving maid with the food. The doctors and Paole had encouraged her to eat little and often, and Sofia worked hard to provide nutritious and tasty treats to tempt her small appetite. She'd only begun to fast once Kardwil had been thrown out of the castle, because she couldn't rely on him covering up her fakery. Paole was thankful she hadn't had to go on any longer. It would take some months before she returned to full health.

But here in the warm sun, she looked healthy and calm, and quite beautiful as she served him pie and poured out cold fruit juice from a wicker-covered jug. "So when will you visit him?" she asked as she picked up her plate. She spoke in Uemi, as was the sisters' habit in private. He found it rather endearing.

"When I'm ready, Serina. I told you."

"But when will that be? He's becoming quite upset, you know."

Paole did know, but that was part of the problem for him. "I'm not ready. I haven't decided if I want to stay or not."

"Can't you talk to him about it?"

"No, I can't. Because I take one look into those big brown eyes, same as yours, and my brain stops working."

She laughed. "Oh. So we have gifts too."

"All too many, Your Grace. I can't be a consort. I need a role. But if I can't marry him, your country offers me none."

"I know. It's not fair. That prick, Konsatin, would have had more official position and duties as my husband, even if I never became the duces."

"Language, dear. Sofia will blame me."

"But he is."

"Yes, he is."

"Don't change the subject."

"Sorry." He gave her a smile. "I'm glad it's all over for you."

"Me too. Go see my brother. Dear Paole, maybe you do have to go home because it's best for you, but it's not fair to keep him waiting for you. He's been through a lot."

"All right. Later, perhaps."

"Later, definitely."

He gave a little sigh. Dogged, that was the word for this family. "As you wish, my lady."

She had a nap after lunch, which meant he couldn't leave her to go herb collecting. Instead he kept watch and thought about all the things that he needed to talk to Yveni about, the things that had stopped him talking to his lover. Serina thought it was so easy, but it wasn't.

Still, it would become no easier, and he was well past the stage where he could pretend Yveni wasn't up to his visit. He needed to show some of the courage that came so easily to Yveni and his sisters.

Serina only slept for an hour and insisted he do what he had come to do, so he spent some time collecting common herbs that were some use in the kitchen if not the infirmary. Then he said they should go back as she still looked tired.

Olana scolded him for not waiting until she was freed from her lesson before they went on their picnic. He had to promise it was her turn the following day before she'd forgive him. The two sisters went back to the residence, and Paole slumped onto a stool in Sofia's kitchen.

"They run me ragged," he complained.

"And you love every minute of it, don't pretend you don't. Are you going to visit Yveni?"

"It's a conspiracy, isn't it? He set you all on me."

"Yes, he did. Paole, my dear man, the worst that can happen is he'll be upset. But you've both endured worse and survived."

"Yes. I'm a coward."

"You're not. None of us are. We're Uemirien, and we're not cowards."

He could only nod. The reputation of their people was a cause close to Sofia's heart, and one of the reasons she and Gil had decided to stay, whatever their sons did. She wanted to show the Sardelsans they were completely wrong about the Uemirien race, and shove their noses in their mistake as often as necessary.

She changed the subject onto the herbs he'd collected and the ones she still sought, but then she gave him a little push. "You're hiding and procrastinating. Get it over with, and come back here and we'll bind your wounds."

"Are you sure you're female? You're tougher than any man I've ever dealt with."

She grinned. "Oh, I'm female. There are more like us than you think. Now wash your hands, remake your braid, change your shirt and put on a smile."

"Yes, mother."

She swatted his arm and he left smartly. Should he change his shirt? No, damn it. It was clean enough and not covered in Yveni's blood. He'd had to burn the one he'd worn that night, though he'd wept as he did so. He'd felt a little like he was burning Yveni, which only showed how stupid he became when he was upset.

He nodded to the clerk at the entrance to the infirmary, thinking to walk straight in as he'd done while Yveni was still under sedation, but the clerk held up his hand. "Master Paole, His Grace isn't here."

“What? Did something happen?”

“No.” The clerk leaned back a little and Paole realised he was looming. He stopped. “He’s been released to his own chambers. Doctor Kardwil felt he’d be more comfortable.”

“And will he be attended there?”

“Of course.” The clerk sounded offended at the very notion that he wouldn’t be. “Do you want to speak to Doctor Kardwil?”

“Not now, thank you. I, uh...good day.”

He escaped before he made a fool of himself. Yveni’s chambers. Where the hell would they be?

He hadn’t set foot inside the castle residence since that night and couldn’t help thinking he was about to be seized as a horrible Uemirien intruder as he passed through the huge open doorway. All that happened was that a young maid came up to him and curtsied. “Master Paole? Do you wish to go to His Grace’s rooms?”

He stared. “Uh, yes. How did you know?”

“Her Grace, the Vicontes Serina told me, sir. And Her Grace, the Vicontes Olana. Oh, and His Grace, the vicont, and Doctor Kardwil.” She grinned at him. “I think Mistress Sofia, Master Gil, and one or two other people might have also mentioned you might be coming over, sir.”

“I understand.” He couldn’t help grinning back. “Am I tidy enough for His Grace?”

“Oh yes, sir. Would you like to follow me?”

Like the girls’ bedrooms, Yveni’s was on the ground floor. Paole wondered where Konsatin had slept and if they’d had to fumigate the room before it could be used again.

The maid opened the door to the bedroom. “Master Paole, Your Grace.”

“Thank you. Come in, Paole.”

He stepped inside, realising he really had left this too long. Yveni sounded quite unfriendly.

He found his lover sitting on a low-backed couch, propped up by pillows but otherwise looking normal. He was dressed tidily in a white shirt, open at the neck, and loose dark trousers with a tied and folded waist of the type many of the Sardelsan nobles preferred. No sign of his injuries other than the long fine scar across his left cheek. He was perhaps a little paler, a little thinner, but considering how seriously hurt he’d been, Paole was amazed by how healthy he looked without and within.

A clerk had been receiving notes, but at Paole’s approach, rose from his chair, bowed and left them.

“Take a seat,” Yveni said, unsmiling, waving casually at the vacated chair.

Paole obeyed. “How are you feeling?”

“Fine, thank you. You?”

The formal manner threw Paole off. “Uh...I’m all right.”

“Good. I was convinced you had to be suffering some hideous and disfiguring illness and that my sisters and friends were lying to me to spare my feelings. Now I see they weren’t.”

“Um...Yveni. I would have come sooner but...”

Yveni gave him a wide-eyed look. “Yes? I think I deserve an explanation. I mean, you saved my life and I’m incredibly grateful, but I’m also angry at you. Please make me not feel angry, Paole, because I hate it.”

“I can’t. You’re right to be. I’m a coward.”

“Why?” Yveni reached out to touch his face. “Why are you scared of me?”

“Not you, sweetness. Well, yes, partly. Of hurting you.”

“But you did hurt me, by avoiding me. I couldn’t think what I’d done to offend you.”

“Nothing! Yveni, it wasn’t anything to do with you. I...needed to think.”

Yveni folded his arms. “And have you finished? Because I have a lot of things to talk to you about, but I’d better hear what you’ve decided.”

Paole took a deep breath. “I’m going back home. I need a role here, and you have all the spaces filled. Best friend? Gil. Adviser? Too many to name. Those to love and protect you? Your sisters. A duty, a future, your duchy. What role can I have, except to love you, and there are so many here who do that. You won your fight, and now I need to go back and get on with my life.”

Yveni stared at him with those eyes he felt so powerless to resist. “I see. Well then, that makes what I had to say utterly pointless. When will you leave?”

“Er.” Paole had expected tears or raging. Something more than this icy calmness. He hated it when Yveni closed down like this. He had no weapon to crack the mask. “Well, there’s no hurry.”

“Raina will finish her studies in a month and will have to make decisions about her future. She wanted to study here. Since you’re no longer interested, I should make the offer to her for this year. You can bear my message.”

“Oh.” Was he angry? His tone was so flat, but nothing he said was rude. Yveni always became rude when he was angry. So...did his departure really not matter? “Of course. Yveni—”

Yveni held up his hand. “No. No apologies or explanations. You made your choice, and I respect your right to do so. You’re free, Paole. A free man, not just a freedman any more, and a citizen of this country as well as Uemire. That means you have the right to do what you want within the law.”

“You’re allowed to express an opinion.”

“Yes, but I am also allowed not to.”

“What if I want you to?”

Yveni shook his head. “You don’t.”

“Yes, I do. Please. Even if it’s of no importance to you at all. I want to know what you think.”

“I said ‘no’.”

“Please, sweetness?”

Yveni heaved a great sigh. “Very well, but remember you asked. My opinion is that you’re a great, stupid nitwit with the brains and sensitivity of a dead kardip and if you’d bothered to talk to me instead of sulking on your own and picking flowers with my sisters, I could have answered some of your concerns. But now you’ve made up your mind, so go home and good luck. The duchy of Sardelsa renders its deepest thanks to you, etcetera etcetera. You bastard.”

Paole sat back, slightly stunned by the stream of abuse. Yveni stared steadily at him. “You asked,” he added politely.

“Yes. A dead kardip?”

“A dead *rotting* kardip.”

Paole’s lips twitched. “That’s pretty stupid.”

“Yes. Paole, being with me doesn’t mean you need me to make your life for you. I thought you wanted to become a trained healer or a doctor. Doctor Kardwil’s eager to have you working with him, and believes even without your gift, you have a real talent for the profession. If you don’t want that, you could set up a herbalist shop like you did in Horches. You and Raina could work in tandem. As for a position, I’ve asked Lord Timur to consider ennobling you, Gil and Sofia as a reward for your role in the restoration, and he’s firmly in favour of it. You could have a title, a career, a house and property as part of your reward—whatever you want.”

“I don’t need all that. I wouldn’t know what to do with a title.”

“You don’t need to *do* anything with it, but it would be a poke in the eye to all those who were so ready to attack your people. Oh, and I should tell you a bit of good news. The Unity have threatened trade bans with Karvis unless they agree to end all slave labour. I’ve submitted my testimony in support, and yours will be asked for. The response so far has been positive. The Karvin king is aware the role of their mercenaries did harm to the relationship between Karvis and the Unity. He’s agreed to accept a group of overseers who will work with the governors in Horches to bring the slaves and ex-slaves home. We think he’ll agree to end child slavery at the very least.”

“That’s wonderful,” Paole breathed. Was this the end for the cruel trade? If Yveni could do this, in so little time, what more would he achieve over his lifetime?

“It’s not on your account, in case you think it was. I wanted those children sent home before they lost touch with their parents. I haven’t given up on yours either. I want to increase ties with Uemire and strengthen her, because that will protect your people and mine. I’ve asked Lord Timur to put it to the Unity that it would be of benefit to us all to lay a telegraph cable, possibly even a telephone line, between Tuelwetin and Uemire, as exists between Tuelwetin and Karvis. If the Unity won’t fund it, I’ll push for it to be laid from here.”

Lying there, so young and harmless, Yveni looked very little like a ruler of anything, but his mind worked so fast. Paole, not for the first time, felt like a lumbering oaf beside him. “You have big plans.”

“Yes, I do, and you could be part of them. Or not, as you wish. If you remain and want to be my consort, that position will be enshrined in the constitution. I’ve told Timur I won’t marry and that when I come of age, I’ll rule with Serina. Her children, or Olana’s, will be my heirs.”

Such a simple solution to a problem which had tormented them both for years. “And he didn’t argue?”

“It’s amazing how cooperative people become when they rid themselves of a despot and the lawful heir manages not to die,” Yveni said wryly. “But Timur reminded me there have been similar arrangements for similar reasons in the past.”

“You never said—”

“You never asked, idiot.” Yveni folded his arms again and glared. “But you’re going back to Horches so it’s all irrelevant, isn’t it?”

“I didn’t want to be a useless hanger-on, like some damn castle pet.”

“I don’t keep people as pets. And I don’t want some useless ninny sitting around and gazing up at me adoringly. I want a partner, a friend, a lover and I want you, you...you moron!”

Paole grinned. Never had an insult sounded so loving. “You have such a way with words, sweetness. All right, I’ll stay, on one condition.”

Yveni cocked an elegant eyebrow at him. “Oh yes?”

“That you let me pick you up, carry you to your bed and make very careful love to you.”

“Hmmm. You drive a hard bargain, Master Paole.”

“Sorry, but I’m firm on that score, Your Grace.”

“Oh, very well. If you drop me, let me remind you I have a very big army and lots of heavily muscled friends.”

Paole stood and stooped to pick Yveni carefully up into his arms. The lad had lost weight, but to hold him again felt right and perfect. With his gift, he checked the healing wounds and judged they were doing well. “I won’t drop you, Yveni, because I intend to never let you go again.”

“Oh. Well then. Carry on, Master Paole. I’m your willing slave.” He tucked his hand inside Paole’s shirt, forgiveness and affection in a simple caress. The burden on his heart Paole had carried for weeks disappeared like mist.

Paole grinned and kissed him, relishing the familiar feel of those familiar lips. “Now the only question is, do I need to chain you up?”

Yveni rested his cheek on Paole’s shirt. “You already did that when I fell in love with you.” But then he looked up, lips pursed, haughty as Paole had ever seen him. “Now be *careful*.”

“Yes, your gracefulness.”

He carried Yveni to the huge bed and laid him gently down on it. “Strip me,” Yveni commanded.

“As you wish.”

Yveni stared at him the whole time, unnerving Paole somewhat. He slid the trousers down Yveni's legs and folded them carefully on a chair. He hesitated at the sight of the scars, memories of that terrible night and seeing Yveni's blood on his hands and clothes, overwhelming him. "Are you in pain, sweetness?"

"Not at all. Can't you tell?"

"I can see your wound has healed, and you seem to be healthy. I can't see pain."

"I'm fine, unless I exert myself too much. I want something from you, and I don't want you to be stupid about it."

Paole couldn't hold in his grin. "Might be difficult."

"Try. I want you to...to fuck me."

"Yveni—"

"Please, Paole. I know it might hurt a little, but it's the first chance we've had where I'm not about to go horse-riding, and we can be private and comfortable. Doctor Kardwil..."

The boy suddenly flushed redder than Paole had ever seen him, and he had to laugh. "You actually asked him about this?"

Yveni nodded. "And, um...he gave me...in the dresser."

Still vastly amused, and not a little touched by Yveni's determination, Paole opened the drawer and held up the pot he found. "This?"

"Yes. He, um...well, he said it was best."

"Sweetness, there's no hurry. You know I'm bigger than you. It might hurt anyway."

Yveni set his jaw. "And I don't *care*. Paole, you keep pulling away from me like you don't believe this is real, what we have. Well, I want to prove it's real. Give you something as real as I can. I don't know what else to do. I've asked Lord Timur to examine the marriage laws to see if there's any legal reason we can't be wed, but it will take so long and I want you *now*."

"You'd really marry me?"

"You can be *so* stupid sometimes."

Paole's grin was so wide, it hurt. "The ring on offer is usually made of gold, sweetness. Ow." The flung cushion had hit him full in the face.

"Paole, fuck me. I command it as your...your..."

"Nearly duc?"

"Yes," Yveni snapped with narrowed eyes. "And lock the door."

"Won't that worry people?"

Yveni's glare could burn a hole in wood. "Do I look as if I give a damn?"

Sometimes Yveni's imperiousness was a real pain in the arse. Today, Paole found it irresistible. He locked the door and returned to the bed. His erection strained at his trousers, and Yveni's cock was unashamedly needy.

"I could just use my mouth."

"Only to say, 'yes, Your Grace, I will fuck you'."

"Yveni, this could *really* hurt. Like the original injury."

"No. I trust you. Use your gift, and your love." He held his hand out towards Paole. "Come." Paole sat on the bed and took Yveni's hand. "Every time you're afraid of hurting me, you hurt me through being afraid. Don't be afraid, and it'll be fine."

"I wish I had your confidence."

"I've enough for both of us. It will be fine, I promise you. Now strip because it's been too long since I saw you. And let me look, because you're beautiful."

Now Paole flushed, something he wasn't prone to, but how could he not in the face of such naked and heartfelt admiration? Yveni watched him, eyes burning in their intense gaze, as Paole slowly undressed, wishing now he *had* taken the time to put a clean shirt on, to remake his braid. How could he be so careless of the most precious thing in the world to him, while Yveni had taken such care in preparing for this?

Finally, when he was nude, he stood before Yveni and let him look his fill. "I dreamt about you," Yveni whispered. "Dreamt about you taking me and holding me. But then I'd wake and you never came. Serina kept saying you weren't ready, and all I could think was that you were talking yourself out of being with me. And I was right."

"Sweetness..." He bent and kissed Yveni. "I'm sorry. Things...they're not as simple as for you. I'm not you."

"No. But you told me off for not talking to you about things before and here you are, doing that to me. Talk to me. Love me. Let me love you. Let us all love you. You have my sisters in the palm of your hand, you realise. And Gil and Sofia. Never alone again."

"Never," Paole murmured. "Takes some getting used to."

"Yes. Like sex." He glanced meaningfully at the pot on the dresser. "I warn you, I won't accept refusal at this point."

He could at least *try*, Paole thought. If he was very careful, and watched Yveni's reactions. But his hand shook a little as he reached for the pot. The idea of hurting Yveni made him sick.

Yveni slid his arm around Paole's hips. "It really will be all right, love."

"I've only ever deliberately injured one person in my life, and that was to save you."

"I know. If you only knew how much I want this. I *need* this. It will hurt me much more if you refuse. I'm no longer a child, Paole. When you met me, I was naïve and careless. I am no longer, and it's because of you."

Paole turned and looked down at Yveni's solemn face. "No, you're not." He drew a deep breath. "Then I will."

He took the jar and lay down on the covers next to Yveni. "We can do it like this, side by side."

“Is...is that usual?”

“It’s one way. It’s a good way.”

“Then that’s fine. What do I do?”

Paole pulled him into his arms, and kissed him long and slow. “First, let me hold you and touch you. I missed you.”

“Every minute,” Yveni breathed. “It hurt so much.”

Paole had apologised, but the real damage would take time to heal, like the sword thrust. He held Yveni close and stroked his back, kissed his forehead, his cheeks, his lips and his chin. Ran his fingers over and over through the fine dark hair, until Yveni’s breathing slowed and his pulse dropped back to normal. Even then, he didn’t hurry. They had time, and Yveni was sweet in his arms.

Only when Yveni was erect again, and his breathing quickened not from anxiety but desire, did Paole move his hands with more obvious intent. He cupped Yveni’s buttock, and wrapped his fingers around his cock. “Paole, I—”

“Shhh. You said you trusted me.”

“I do.” Yveni relaxed and let Paole have his way. Paole rolled him onto his back again, and slid down, gently stroking Yveni’s stomach, using his gift to test and examine the scar and what lay beneath. They’d need to take care but...yes, if he did, it would work.

He moved his hand on Yveni’s erection, and then put his mouth on it, cupping Yveni’s balls. This, he had done many times now, and Yveni to him. He’d use that familiarity to ease Yveni into what he so desperately sought.

He sucked and worked Yveni’s cock with his lips and tongue, stroking and rolling his balls, not bringing him to the edge of climax, but keeping him stimulated and hard. He surreptitiously sought the jar with his other hand and unscrewed the lid, scooped up a fingerful of the thick salve and stroked it over Yveni’s tight little hole. His lover gasped and jerked, but settled almost as quickly. Just surprised, and Yveni petted Paole’s hair almost as an apology. Brave lad.

He stroked some more, allowing Yveni to grow used to the sensation, and when he slipped his finger tip in, Yveni’s breathing quickened only a little. It took some concentration to keep the rhythm of mouth and hands coordinated, but nothing pleased him more than to give pleasure freely, so the effort felt good, and so did Yveni under his tongue and fingers. He added more salve, stretched and explored a little more, encouraged by the obvious enjoyment Yveni took in what he did. The lad squirmed and gasped and sighed but not once gave any sign he was in pain. Still, this was only the start.

His finger stretching Yveni’s hole, he worked his cock faster, stroking with his other hand and bringing Yveni off, tight muscles clamping his finger as Yveni came. He licked and swallowed and gave Yveni plenty of time to enjoy the climax, before cuddling him close and waiting for his breathing to ease again. He kept his finger inside him, moving it gently, but making no insistent gesture.

“Why did you do that?” Yveni whispered against his chest.

“To relax you. Don’t worry, it’s far from over.”

“I like...that.”

“My finger?”

“Mmmm. Do it some more.”

Paole did, adding more salve, stretching, probing, while holding Yveni against him and using his gift to watch for the slightest change for the worse. “Comfortable?”

“Mmmm. ’S good. Nice hands.”

“Nice arse.”

Yveni chuckled. “You had so many.”

“Aye, but yours is best. Because it’s yours.”

“Sentimental.”

“Only the truth. Now, you’re really not in pain?”

“It pulls when I move but it’s bearable. The pleasure is more than any discomfort.”

“Tell me if that changes.”

“Yes, I will. Keep going.”

He had never taken it this slow with any of his young men, but none of them had been injured. He watched Yveni’s eyes and listened to his heartbeat as he eased another finger in. A little gasp, a quiet “gods”, but no wriggle of discomfort met his action. “Like that?”

“Oh yes.” Yveni shifted his leg to give Paole more access and for the first time, winced.

“No, don’t move. I’ll move you.” He kissed Yveni’s forehead and rested against it for a moment. “I’m going to roll you over.” He grabbed a pillow and placed it on Yveni’s side. “Slowly.”

For all their care, Yveni grunted a little in pain, and curled around the pillow for support. Paole stroked his back and kissed between his shoulder blades until he sensed Yveni’s heart rate ease again. “Sorry, sweetness.”

“It’s...all right. That’s the worst of it.”

“Deep breaths. That’s good.”

“Please, Paole. I’m ready.”

“I know. I want to enjoy this too. You’ve been a virgin for nineteen and a half years. Nineteen and a half minutes more won’t kill you.”

“How do you know? Touch me again. Make me *feel* you.”

Still kissing and nuzzling at Yveni’s nape, Paole put more salve on his fingers and went back to playing with Yveni’s lovely arse. His cock twitched eagerly, waiting to find its home, but it was wider than two fingers, and Yveni was *very* tight. He didn’t want Yveni to know what it was like to be ripped apart by someone forcing him. He didn’t want anyone else to ever know that.

But the lad was ready, and eager, and Paole wanted him so very much. He put salve on his cock and nudged in gently. Yveni tensed up, gasping. “Easy, sweetness. Breathe. Breathe deep.”

“It...doesn’t hurt. It’s just...feels so huge.”

“I know.”

“Go on. I’m ready.”

A little farther in, and wait, still kissing and petting and murmuring encouragement to his love. It probably did hurt, despite what Yveni said, but so long as it felt good too...

“Feel that, sweetness? I’m right inside you. I’m as close as I can be.”

“That’s what I wanted. Oh, Paole. It’s so good. I wish I could see you.”

“Next time. Just feel me now.”

“Can you see me inside you? With your gift?”

“Aye, and it’s beautiful. Like we’re one being.”

“I wish I could see it. But I feel we’re one. I knew this was right. Do...uh...you move now?”

“Ready?”

“Please.”

So he pulled back, thrust carefully. Yveni moaned, but not in pain, and when Paole stopped, he urged him to do it again, and again. Paole took Yveni’s cock in hand, and though it wasn’t erect, he could still stroke and squeeze and play, licking Yveni’s neck and shoulders, nibbling his earlobe in the way the lad liked best. Yveni felt so good, so tight and hot around him, it took real effort not to plunder him to relieve the driving need inside, but Paole kept control, and watched with eyes and gift and thoughts so that this would be more pleasure than pain for his lover.

Yveni moaned continuously now, his hips thrusting back and forth spasmodically, against Paole’s cock, into Paole’s hand, wanting more, wanting it faster. Paole dared not, but he speeded up a little. They breathed in synchrony, both covered in sweat, both needing the same thing, to come, to feel, to be joined as intimately as the physical allowed. Paole came with a quiet groan, spilling into Yveni’s tight and beautiful body, and in his hand, Yveni’s perfect cock twitched and jerked, and yielded his lover another climax, smaller but still powerful. Yveni gasped as the tension pulled on sore, healing muscles and the inflexible scar tissue, but only a little. The pain was less than the delight, and that was what Paole wanted, for now, for always.

He lay limp, listening to Yveni’s breath, feeling his pulse under the skin against his cheek. His cock softened but was content where it was, as was he, so there was no need to move right now. “Well, sweetness?”

“It was good, but now I’m really angry.”

Paole blinked, shocked out of his peaceful lassitude. “What? Why?”

“That you made me wait for it. Such a bastard, Paole.”

Paole grinned and kissed Yveni's sweat-damp shoulder. "My apologies. I won't make that mistake again."

"Absolutely not. And I expect you to take a very long time making it up to me. Understood?"

"Understood, your gracefulness. Do I have permission to take a lifetime?"

Yveni picked up Paole's sticky hand and kissed it, then looked up with his dark eyes shining. "Yes, you do."

About the Author

Ann Somerville is a native of Queensland, Australia and after many years living in London, has returned home and now writes full time. She holds degrees in science, arts and internet technology, has written scholarly articles on several Victorian natural historians, and her partner is a zoologist, so her head is full of occasionally useful knowledge about amazingly useless things. She doesn't want to ever get to the point where writing becomes work, because she's having way too much fun with it.

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Look for these titles by Ann Somerville

Now Available

Interstitial
On Wings, Rising
Reaching Higher
Many Roads Home

Dinun can't fly—but he could be the answer to an Angel's prayer.

On Wings, Rising

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The Encounters series, Book 1

Barely tolerated by his own kind, Dinun is a self-reliant soul who scratches out a living from the great, empty lands of Quarn. Always looking for unexpected treasure, he never dreams of finding an injured Angel.

Moon belongs to a race of telepathic winged humanoids. Exquisitely beautiful, sexually playful, Angels have always fascinated humans. Dinun's feelings for Moon take flight as they become lovers, but a planetary invasion could destroy their future together.

Centuries ago, humans on Quarn saved their race from destruction by joining their DNA with that of the Angels. Now full-blood humans are stealing Angel children—including Moon's son—for barbaric experiments. The full-bloods are prepared to slaughter anyone who gets in their way.

Thrust into a desperate race against time to save the infants, Dinun and Moon must battle against a people with weapons far beyond anything the Angels—or their human friends—can hope to defeat. Dinun brings to the fight his bravery and a determination to be true to himself. Will that be enough to save the children, and win the Angel he's come to love?

Warning: This title contains graphic interspecies winged sex and violence.

Enjoy the following excerpt for On Wings, Rising:

When he brought the second can of warmed water over, Moon carefully extended the wing to make cleaning easier. Now Dinun could appreciate just how long and wide it was, though it folded up to little thicker than Dinun's arm.

"Beautiful," he murmured as he wiped the cleaning leather down the silky fur.

::Pleased::

Dinun looked up. "Doesn't it hurt?"

"No. You. Touch." ::Pleased::

Huh. Knowing that made him rather self-conscious, made him notice the way the fur shone in the afternoon sun, how the skin fluttered each time he stroked it with the leather. When he finally finished and tossed the leather into the bloodied water, ready to empty it away from the camp, he saw a rather more obvious sign of Moon's enjoyment of the cleaning. The Angel sported a proud and sizeable erection from behind the fold of skin that normally covered his genitals.

"Oh. Uh."

Moon covered his cock with his hand. *"You. Dislike."* *::Regretful::*

“No, no...it’s, uh, impressive. Um, very big. In a good way. Excuse me.”

Dinun stood and grabbed the cans of water, bolting over to the stream to dispose of the dirty liquid. “By the spirits,” he breathed as he poured the water from the cans downstream of the collecting point. He reached inside his trousers to adjust himself. It was one thing to give a furtive blowjob or five to the supposedly happily married Kenwil or Rujo behind the stables, or to masturbate in his own bed to memories of men working in the fields, bared to the chest, but he’d never in all his life seen...

It had been beautiful. Perfect and long. Dinun wanted to know what it would taste like. What it would be like to kiss Moon or to feel those elegant Angel lips on his own cock—not that he knew what it was like to have *anyone’s* mouth on his penis, but he had a pretty fertile imagination. Being the only invert—officially at least—in a little settlement like Getake, it was either imagination or nothing.

His widowed ma, blessed be her spirit, had explained in her own gentle, nonjudgemental way what Dinun’s embarrassed admissions about not really wanting to have sex with girls meant. That it was normal, and certain men and women were just made that way, which was why their society allowed for provider-partners and same-sex troths. Talking to her, he’d felt good about himself. He was different but not wrong.

But then his ma died of a raging infection in wounds she’d sustained working with an injured bolli, and Dinun had lost one of his staunchest supporters before he’d turned twenty. Sora filled the gap a little way, but their relationship was based on commerce more than affection. Without his mother, Dinun had been exposed to the small-minded censure of a small-minded town. He knew more dirty secrets than he bet old Lopi would ever imagine existed, but *officially*, he was the only male in town who preferred other men.

So what was the Angel doing, exposing himself like that? Offering? Boasting? Having a reaction to the physical stimulus?

Moon was perfect, even with the injury. Angels had a reputation for bewitching all who beheld them, and now Dinun understood why. Moon only had to turn that liquid green gaze on him and Dinun felt like doing anything he asked. Not that this was the reason he was helping, Dinun sternly told himself. The fact that he had a big, beautiful...

Get a grip. Moon was injured and desperate to find his child. Dallying with someone from a different species...race, at least...was probably the last thing on his mind.

Probably.

Dinun rinsed out the cans and the leather, and walked back with fresh water. Moon was eyeing the cooking birds on the fire.

“You’re hungry?”

“*Yes. You. Anger.*” ::*Worried::*

“No, I’m okay. I uh...was surprised. Not angry. You didn’t do anything wrong. How do you feel? The wing, I mean.”

“*Pain. Small.*” ::*Relieved::*

“Good. Here, have some of this.”

He set a plate of cooked fowl meat on Moon’s good side so he could eat while Dinun finished dressing and binding the injury. Amazingly, even the burn marks seemed to be fading. All this would have fascinated his mother. Dinun didn’t have the training to describe accurately what was going on. He suspected if he tried, it would sound magical, which wouldn’t endear him to the settlement council.

Moon docilely permitted Dinun to bundle him up in the cleaned doem skin. *“Tomorrow. I. Fly.”*
::Determined::

“Probably.” He finished fastening the clips to keep the skin secure and turned to find himself almost nose to nose with the Angel. “Uh.”

“Dinun.” ::Grateful::

“Uh, you’re welcome.” Moon’s huge eyes seemed to draw him in. Dinun couldn’t make himself look away, but then he jumped as Moon lifted his hand to touch his face.

“Dinun. Kin.” ::Pleased::

“I suppose we are. I mean, we have the same skin and your fur’s like my hair—”

Moon cut off his nervous babbling by the simple application of his lips. Dinun froze in shock. No one had kissed him before, and certainly not—

Moon’s good arm went around him and pulled him closer. Dinun had enough presence of mind not to jostle Moon’s injured side, before he gave himself over completely to the feel of Moon’s firm mouth and eager tongue.

Moon tasted of roast meat and something else that was just him. His tongue sliding against Dinun’s made Dinun shiver, and he didn’t know why lips felt so good against his mouth, when he didn’t think his own were that sensitive. It was like...all of it together was a kind of magic. Not *just* the lips, or the tongue, or Moon’s hands, or the tingle of excitement as Dinun felt the very edge of Moon’s teeth. It was all of it together, until his mind filled with pleasure, his body coming alive, until every touch made him want to climb inside Moon’s skin just to be closer to him. It was nothing like anything he’d imagined before. Ever read about.

Even in his loose fitting trousers, Dinun felt a bit cramped, urgently needing relief, and against his stomach, Moon’s erection was hard and insistent with the Angel’s little thrusts making it clear what Moon wanted. But Dinun had never...

He slid down Moon’s silky legs until he was face to face with the long slender cock, so dark and perfect. This, he was confident he could do right. He’d had enough practice behind those stinky old stables.

Moon stroked Dinun’s face as he sucked, determined to make this the best blowjob he’d ever given. None of the men in the settlement had ever touched him or kissed him, had even spoken to him as they pushed him to his knees. Moon didn’t speak either but Dinun was immersed in pleasure coming from his companion, assured of his value by the gentle caresses, the intense desire and approval Moon sent in pulses

towards him. Dinun stroked behind Moon's cock where the small, tight balls were hidden by more luscious fur, dared to explore the swell of narrow buttocks and the tight cleft. But it was Moon's cock that fascinated him. Sweetly shaped and sensitive to the lightest pressure, it responded to every caress, every slight movement, shivering and jumping as Moon shivered and jumped. Dinun thrilled at the reactions he wrought, so different from the stolid grunts and ignorant thrusts of the men in the settlement.

Moon came in one tidy, polite spurt and a flute-like vocalisation, shockingly loud after his habitual silence. Dinun swallowed and licked the unfamiliar but not unpleasant taste, resting his head on Moon's thigh until the Angel got his breathing under control. Then Moon tugged Dinun up again so he could kiss him and pet his earlobe affectionately.

"You." ::Grateful::

"You're welcome," Dinun whispered, his voice all husky from emotion. Spirits help him, Moon was beautiful.

Moon tugged insistently at Dinun's pants but didn't seem to know what to do to release him. Dinun quickly undid his belt and buttons, pulling his erection free. "Please?"

His wanton need washed away all embarrassment at being so bold but Moon sent a little wave of admiration at the sight of him, which made Dinun flush hot and feel like a giant among men, all at the same time.

Moon kissed him again as he put his hand on Dinun's cock, Dinun kneeling spread-legged to give him access. It didn't matter that this was the only way Dinun had ever come. What mattered was that it was someone else's hand for once, and a hand of someone who responded to him as a person, not a dirty, secret convenience. Moon's grip was strong and knowing, his mouth commanding Dinun as his hand stroked Dinun to a quick but powerful climax that left Dinun panting and hungry for...something.

Something more, he guessed. The appetite woken in his belly would not be sated with a handjob, but it was more than a start.

Blessed spirits. He'd just had sex with an Angel. He'd just had *sex*. At the age of twenty-eight, he was no longer a virgin. Mostly not, anyway.

He'd had sex with an *Angel*. Wow.

Love...or freedom?

If All the Sand Were Pearl

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A Calling of Souls story.

As a youngest son, Jag Martin has eagerly walked a life-long path toward the priesthood. Then his once-great family falters under a mountain of debt. Their only hope—marry Jag off to an appropriately wealthy suitor.

Brace Rivers desperately wants more than just a short fling. However, his economic and political reality makes finding an appropriate male partner next to impossible. When the Martin family offers Jag's hand, it's a dream come true. But his suspicions mount that the young man is being forced into an unwanted marriage.

Compassion wins out over loneliness, and Brace offers Jag a pearl ring valuable enough to both save his family's fortunes and give him freedom. There's just one thing Brace wants in return—twenty-four hours together.

Brace can only pray it's long enough to convince Jag that a life together is worth more than all the pearls in the sea.

Warning: Explicit M/M content, use of toys, outdoor sex.

Enjoy the following excerpt for If All the Sand Were Pearl:

Jag shaved the last patch of hair away then reached for one of the warm towels. He dabbed the towel against Brace's cheeks, wiping away the lather. Jag caught his breath as he pulled the towel away, and his cock jerked again. Without speaking, he cupped his betrothed's face and tilted his head.

He didn't seek out Brace's mouth immediately. He skimmed his lips across his upper lip, his cheeks and jaw. Each caress was soft and thin, the barest brush of contact connecting them. Brace held still, his muscles tense, holding his breath. Even his thumb stilled. Jag kissed his brow, and his eyes fluttered shut, allowing Jag the chance to kiss each of his eyelids.

Jag didn't quite understand why, but the longer he teased Brace with his mouth, the harder he got. His cock jutted between them, the tip brushing against Brace's stomach. As soon as his mouth drifted closer to Brace's again, Brace turned his head and caught Jag's lips. Brace traced his bottom lip with his tongue, seeking the access that Jag wanted to grant. Jag parted his lips, welcoming Brace's caress.

The first kiss they had shared had made Jag's head spin. The kiss they had shared while Brace was inside of him had made him melt. This kiss was a curious combination. The back of his neck prickled, and so did his palms, and lips, and the bottoms of his feet. In a way, it was like kissing an entirely new person. Before, the bristly whiskers had scratched against his chin, providing a contrast to Brace's soft, probing

tongue. But now there was nothing but smooth skin and a demanding mouth, and Jag didn't know how he was going to keep his feet.

Brace put a hand up to his face once the kiss ended, rubbing his cheek with a nod of satisfaction. "Better than my barber usually does it."

"I think I bring a little something extra to the work."

"You do. A certain passion that the barber lacks."

Jag's lips were still close to Brace's, and each word was a warm puff of breath against his face. "Not everybody can be as passionate as I am."

Brace teased his mouth with his tongue, licking his bottom lip before drawing it between his teeth. He nipped at the soft skin playfully before deepening the caress. If there was one thing Jag had learned about Brace, it was that the man liked to kiss. And he was good at it. Jag didn't have anybody to compare him to, but he was still certain that Brace had to be an expert. Only a man of great learning and skill could reduce him to such an incoherent mess so quickly.

When Brace broke the kiss, Jag sank to his knees. Partly because he was weakened. Partly because he was eager to explore other parts of Brace's body. He didn't know if he could be so bold with anybody else, but Brace so obviously appreciated everything Jag did. Jag had never felt so confident about something so alien to him.

Brace rested one hand on top of Jag's head, but he didn't apply any pressure, or try to guide Jag towards anything. Jag trailed hard, sloppy kisses down Brace's chest and over his stomach. His skin radiated warmth, and Jag thought he could catch a trace of the scent of green leaves and clover lingering on his body.

Jag looked up and blinked. "Your horses."

"What?"

"That's why you're tan. That's where you spend your time. In the stables, with your horses."

Brace nodded. "It's spring. I've been training them."

Jag ran his fingers over Brace's muscles with new appreciation. "Could you show me how to do that?"

"Train horses?"

"Yes."

"If that's what you'd like. I spend a lot of time in the spring and summer with the horses. I rarely even return home during those months. I would appreciate the company."

Jag smiled, trying to imagine what his own skin would smell like if he were surrounded by horses and clover and sunshine. Resolving to ask more questions about it later, Jag returned to his exploration. Brace's stomach was hard and flat, and the line from his hip to his groin was well defined. Jag followed it with his tongue until he reached Brace's groin. His tight hair tickled Jag's chin and nose, and here he didn't smell

like clover. It was a musky, darker smell, and it triggered something in the back of Jag's mind. Something like hunger, only deeper.

He dragged his mouth over the top of Brace's erection, surprised by how smooth and soft his skin was. He tasted salty, but otherwise Jag mostly tasted soap. Until he reached the crown. There the texture of the skin changed, and Jag ran the flat of his tongue over it again and again, caught up in the differences, until Brace's hand tightened on the back of his head.

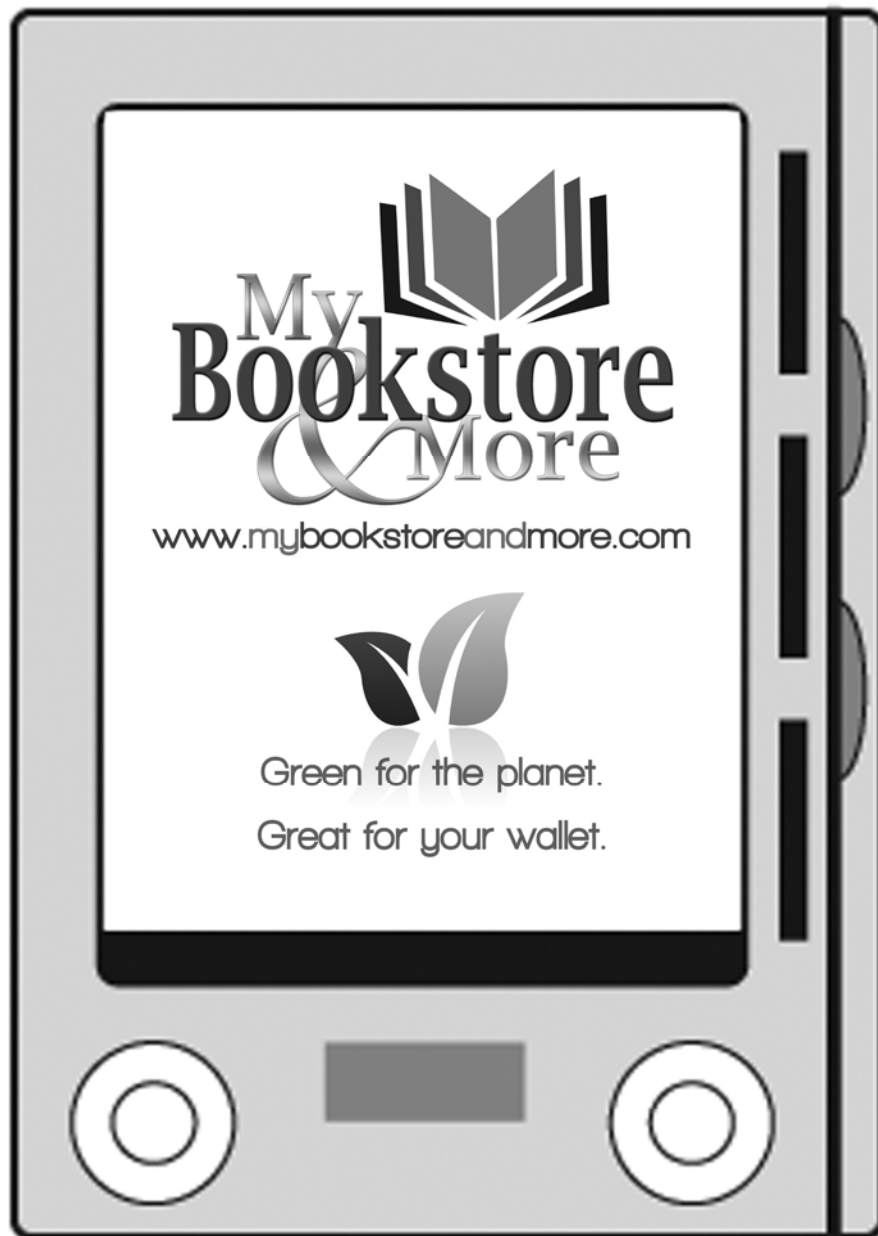
"Goddess, Jag..."

Jag looked up from beneath his lashes and smiled shyly. "Was that not okay?"

"No," Brace said quickly. "No. It's good. Just...I'm very sensitive."

Jag ducked his eyes. He moved from the flat top of the crown to the tip. His betrothed's slit was already leaking a little bit, and Jag swiped his tongue over the slick skin. Brace hissed, his fingers flexing against Jag's skull. Jag didn't know if Brace wanted him to move faster, or if he was pleased with the pace. And he didn't understand how he could get so much satisfaction from this act. But his flesh was warm, his stomach tied in pleasant knots, and his groin was tight. He gripped Brace's cock with one hand and wrapped the other around his own erection and began to stroke them both in an easy rhythm.

"Oh...don't stop. Please. Just keep doing that."



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