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A Crown of Stars:

The Sun, The Moon, and The Stars II

A novel of homoerotic fantasy by

L.E. BRYCE

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Author's note

Maps of Rhodeen and Khalgar can be viewed at: www.lebryce.com/maps.html [Back to Table of Contents]

Prologue

Zhanil barely noticed the man entering the nursery. From the pile of painted soldiers, animals, and blocks, he picked up the wooden horse that was his favorite toy—white with a red saddle—and gave his friend Arjuna the horse with the blue saddle. Both horses were chewed around the ears, and the paint was peeling from the hooves and underbellies. These were the signs of well-loved toys that had belonged to the boys for as long as they could remember.

Zhanil saw the flash of metal from the corner of his vision, but did not turn or realize something was wrong until Arjuna cried out.

Arjuna fell to his knees on the carpet beside him. Zhanil saw the man, whom he did not recognize as one of the servants, and the blood dripping from the knife in his hand. Bewilderment kept him from moving or crying out, even though Arjuna bawled on the floor nearby, and the man inched toward him.

A figure, disheveled and wild-eyed with rage, appeared in the doorway behind the man. Zhanil's only coherent thought was a name: *Adeja*. Open-mouthed, he watched his guardian—whom he knew was ill with a fever—seize his would-be assailant, shove him into the hallway and fall upon him with terrifying violence.

Shadows told the rest of the story. A knife rose and fell, and droplets of blood spattered against the wall in time to the sounds of one man pummeling another until there was only silence.

The next thing Zhanil saw was Adeja, covered in blood, looming like a nightmare before him. Adeja stared at him, then steadied his wobbling frame against the doorjamb and lurched forward to gather Arjuna into his arms. "It is only a scratch," he rasped, his throat sore. "Stop crying. He's gone now."

Arjuna buried his face in his father's chest and sobbed. Zhanil looked from him to the pool of blood spreading in the doorway, then heard the alarm spread through the household. "What happened?" he asked.

Adeja, still hugging Arjuna close, looked at him. "Someone tried to kill you."

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Part One

The Sun at His Back

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Chapter One

"This is a terrible idea," said Adeja. "I hope you realize that."

Standing by the window with his arms crossed over his chest, Zhanil presented an impressive image: dark-haired, tall, and strong, much like the uncle for whom he had been named. At eighteen, however, he was also stubborn and naïve. *Age will cure him of this foolishness,* thought Adeja, *if it doesn't kill him first.* "Your grandfather put you up to this, didn't he?"

"Why must you think my every thought or action comes from him?" Zhanil asked irritably. "You think *he* tells me what to do, yet whenever I speak to him, or to my parents, they think *you're* the one leaning on me. No one gives me credit for having my own opinions."

"I'm not about to give you credit for such a ridiculous idea," said Adeja. "Ampheres has military ambitions. I wouldn't be in the least bit surprised if he intends to start acting on them."

Zhanil moved away from the window to take a seat behind a desk cluttered with papers. While he kept his weapons, armor, and riding gear in good order, his clothes and other belongings were a different matter altogether; it was a habit which his parents deplored, and which Adeja overlooked once he realized he could not do anything about it.

"Whenever I visit, Rhodeen is usually the topic of conversation—it's either that or marriage—and Grandfather

wants me to be present whenever he receives Turya ambassadors. Father doesn't like his meddling, and neither do I, but I assure you this was my own idea. I think I should at least see the kingdom I might be asked to invade before I agree to anything."

"Under normal circumstances, that would be a wise decision," said Adeja, "but if the Turyar discover who you are, they'll kill you at the border."

"Of course they would, which is why we're going in disguise." Zhanil shuffled through some papers and found a scrap of parchment. Adeja could not see what it said, but guessed the prince had made yet another of the lists of which he was so fond.

"*We*, my prince?" asked Adeja. "I never said I would come with you."

"I hardly think you'd let me go alone," replied Zhanil. "Then again, I'm not convinced there'll be that much danger, not if we plan correctly. Khalgari travelers cross the border and conduct business with the Turyar all the time. A small party of, say, four men in plain clothes wouldn't attract notice."

Stepping forward, Adeja tapped the list with his forefinger. "In all this meticulous planning, did it *once* occur to you that the Turya embassy *might* have spies watching your every move? If you leave Bhellin, you'll be followed, and if you try to cross the border, armed men will be waiting for you. It's suicide."

Zhanil remained unmoved. "Not if we go through Ottabia," he said. "My great-uncle has an estate there, and there's a

sanctuary of Abh very close by. We can travel openly to see Olmor and visit the sanctuary with a larger party, then a few of us can slip out as pilgrims. Father is on good terms with the chief priest, so Bedren can help cover our absence in case any Turyar come looking for us."

Adeja paused, realized Zhanil was absolutely set on this course of action, and sighed. *Damn you for being so sly*, he thought. Then again, teaching the prince to be deceptive was his own fault. "I'll *think* about it," he said, "but that doesn't necessarily mean I'm going to go along with it."

* * * *

After leaving the prince, Adeja took lunch with members of the palace garrison, ignoring their conversation to contemplate his next move. Zhanil had acquired his headstrong nature from both parents, so it was only natural that he would insist on having his own way.

"Hey, you, soldier."

A pewter spoon tapping the edge of his plate brought him back to attention, and Adeja found himself staring at Kendro, one of the guards from the inner plaza. "You want something, ugly?"

Kendro nodded toward his soup. "You gonna eat that, or sit there moon-faced while it goes cold?"

Sephil would want to know what Zhanil intended to do, and he would not want to hear it from a secondhand source. *I'll have to be the one to tell him*. Adeja waved Kendro away, dunked a piece of bread into the soup, and finished eating. At the outer gate, Adeja signed himself out of the palace, tucked his entry chit into a pocket, and walked the short distance to the temple precinct. Khalgar shared many gods with Tajhaan, which would have reassured Adeja had he felt the urge to pray; his lapses were a bad habit for which his otherwise soft-spoken wife reprimanded him. "How will your son learn reverence for the gods if you don't teach him?" she asked.

"Better Arjuna learns to watch his own back, rather than rely on some god to do it for him," he answered.

Tucked amid the larger temples was a small compound devoted to the worship of Abh, the god of healing. Adeja walked unchallenged through the gate and into the main courtyard, where several servants and a priest recognized him. He approached the nearest man, offered the ritual greeting, and asked, "Where is the prince? I need to speak with him."

"In the kitchen," said the groom. "Should I let him know you're here?"

Adeja waved his refusal. "No, I'll find him myself."

These days, Sephil spent most of his time in the sanctuary, living there four months out of the year, leaving only for important festivals or personal emergencies. Sephil's interest in the priesthood had brought him much credit over the last nineteen years, negating most of the slurs and rumors of past indiscretions. Yet while he enjoyed a favorable public image, he also had a genuine vocation, finding contentment through prayer, meditation, and charitable works.

Adeja found him in the sanctuary kitchen, helping the cooks fill bowls of soup to feed the destitute who came seeking succor. "My prince, I need to speak with you."

Sephil glanced up, clearly surprised to see him. "Is it urgent?"

"It's about your son."

"These days it usually is, Adeja. What has he done now?" Then, seeing Adeja did not share in the joke, Sephil changed his tone. "Has something happened to him?"

"Not yet, but I need to speak with you before something does."

Handing his ladle off to another priest, Sephil removed the apron he wore over his robes and followed Adeja into the corridor. Once he confirmed that they were alone, he asked, "Now tell me what is wrong?"

"Zhanil is talking about going to Rhodeen."

Sephil's eyes widened. "What?"

"He intends to go in secret," explained Adeja, "with three or four men for protection. He claims he wants to see what Rhodeen is like."

"Was this his grandfather's idea?" asked Sephil. "Gods help him if it was. He will get himself killed crossing the border."

Adeja shook his head. "No, he claims it was all his idea. I've warned him against going, and done everything else I can, but he won't listen to reason."

"But you cannot stop him," finished Sephil. Suddenly he seemed much older and frailer than his thirty-nine years, and Adeja had to restrain the urge to place a comforting hand on his shoulder. "He will not listen to me either, Adeja. He thinks I am too much the pacifist."

"Young men are foolish," said Adeja. "Most of the time only experience can cure them of their delusions. Zhanil's set on this expedition, and he's old enough to do as he wishes. If he goes, I'll go with him, of course, just to keep him away from Shemin-at-Khul and Cassiare. There's plenty of interaction between the Turyar and Khalgari travelers on the frontier, so he might be perfectly safe there as long as he maintains his disguise."

"But you are Tajhaani, Adeja," said Sephil. "People will notice you."

Adeja smiled to reassure him. "I lost my accent twenty years ago, my prince, and my coloring isn't much different than most Khalgari. If it makes you feel better, I could stay at home and have Amset and Nahar go with him, since they both speak Rhodeen, but I think you'd rather I went along."

Sephil put his face in his hands and slumped against the wall. "If anything happens to him, Adeja," he began, "I do not know what I will do."

Ignoring the risk, Adeja placed a steadying hand on his arm. "If anything happens, then neither one of us will come back. It'll be all right, my prince. As long as he listens to this old soldier and doesn't do anything foolish, I think it'll be all right."

Sephil nodded, yet looked no less apprehensive than before. "I do not want to have to explain this to his mother."

"No doubt he'll tell her himself," said Adeja.

"Will Arjuna be going with you?"

"No, he goes to the academy in two days."

"Give my love to him," said Sephil, "and tell Zhanil I wish to see him before he goes. If he hesitates or says he is busy, tell him it is not a request, and that I will come looking for him if he does not."

* * * *

From the moment he received the message, Zhanil knew his father was displeased. Now, sitting across from Sephil in a narrow room in the sanctuary of Abh, he struggled to explain and offer assurances that he knew what he was doing. His confidence faltering, it was all he could do to sound coherent.

His father answered with a sharply indrawn breath. "Do you merely wish to see Rhodeen," asked Sephil, "or do you wish to lead an army there?"

"Give me credit for having my own ambitions."

"When your ambitions coincide too much with the nonsense your grandfather has been pouring into your head, I have to question that," said Sephil. "If he has anything to do with this, I will tell you now that your plan—and *any* possible campaign that comes out of it—is doomed. Your grandfather knows what the Turyar are like in battle, and if he has not yet told you, he is a fool."

While Zhanil knew that his father did not always approve of his grandfather, it was rare to hear him say so, and with such vehemence, for it was not often that Sephil showed his anger. "I've been told that they're fierce in battle, and that they attack without warning."

"And did your grandfather or any of your tutors tell you what atrocities they commit on those unfortunate enough to be taken by them?"

"Adeja told me they don't always spare the innocent," said Zhanil.

The smile with which Sephil answered him was a grim thing that stayed in Zhanil's mind long after the conversation ended. "Did he tell you anything more than that? Did he tell you how the Turyar hacked off your uncle Zhanil's head and used his mutilated body as a banner? Or how they butchered your grandfather and your uncle's wife and small children, throwing the bodies from the pyramid of the Sun?"

In fact, Adeja described only his own encounters with the Turyar, telling how they razed villages and sacked the mountain citadel of Mekesh, from which he had barely escaped with his life. On the subject of the sack of Rhodeen, he deferred to Zhanil's father, who refused to discuss it at all.

"When you were born," continued Sephil, "your mother hated it that I called you Zhanil. She thought you would meet the same fate as your uncle. How am I going to console her when the Turyar send your body back home in twenty pieces?"

Blinking back horrific mental images, Zhanil swallowed hard. "This isn't about conquest, Father," he replied. "I know what Grandfather thinks, and what his ambitions are—"

"Your grandfather is too careful to reveal his ambitions."

Ever the master of equivocation, Ampheres neither uttered promises nor described his plans when it came to Zhanil's future, yet in small turns of phrase or appointments made,

Zhanil thought he could glimpse the strategist beneath his grandfather's neutral exterior. It was the king, not his father, who had him learn the language of Rhodeen, as well as the customs and gods of a land alien to Khalgar. While his cousins took their martial training together, Zhanil had private tutors.

He obeyed his instructors, yet he was no fool. *I am* eighteen now, and an adult, but what am I to do with the rest of my life? Neither Grandfather nor anyone else has said anything to me about choosing a path, whether it be the army, or the priesthood, or anything else. Grandfather doesn't suffer fools, much less lazy ones. He has plans for me. He just hasn't seen fit to tell me what they are.

"My education hasn't been for nothing," he said. "You know as well as I that all those private tutors have been grooming me for something, though what that something is, I don't quite know. But the day might come when Grandfather decides to make a claim on the throne of Rhodeen. I want to be ready when that time comes. Our enemies in Tajhaan aren't sitting comfortably in their palace waiting for *turkan* Arzhati or the other Turya leaders to conveniently vacate Rhodeen, because the Turyar have made it clear that they're not leaving. Tajhaan is already conducting raids and laying the foundations for an invasion—"

"I thought you just said this was not about conquest," said Sephil.

Zhanil searched for the right words, wishing his father could simply understand without his having to explain. *This should be so obvious, and yet he doesn't see it.* "It is not, but they will eventually make a move, and if they oust the Turyar from Rhodeen, they will be on our doorstep."

"A prince does not conduct his own reconnaissance," replied Sephil. "Find yourself reliable advisors and spies."

"Who will do what: lie to and flatter me? I want to see Rhodeen with my own eyes," said Zhanil.

Sephil sighed heavily. "I do not know what you expect to see, but you will find a very different land from the one I left."

"I know," replied Zhanil, "and that's why I want to go myself. I want to know firsthand how the people are living under their Turya leaders. I want to know if they are content, or if they are living in fear and oppression. That isn't something I can get from the ambassadors who come to court, and I don't trust any of the spies here in Khalgar to tell the truth. Grandfather controls them all, and he'll pay them to say what he wants me to hear."

Leaning forward, Sephil propped his elbows on the table and placed his head in his hands. "Your good intentions could kill you," he said heavily. "My only consolation is that I do not have to remind you to roughen your speech. You speak like a common soldier already."

In another context, the comment would have been a barb, but Zhanil could see in his father's posture and voice how much the situation pained him. Not knowing what else to do or say, Zhanil tried to ease the tension with humor. "Father, I don't speak like a soldier *all* the time."

The tactic did not work. "No," agreed Sephil, "but sometimes you forget you are a prince. Perhaps it did not matter so much when you were a child, but now that you are grown you must remember to behave with greater discretion. Right now, there is an uneasy peace between Khalgar and the Turyar. Should you be discovered crossing the border, you might be killed. The peace could be broken and Khalgar drawn into war where we cannot afford it. You must consider that outcome."

"You're telling me things I already know. Believe me, I *have* thought this out," said Zhanil. "The Turyar won't even know I've been there."

"Adeja is against this."

Zhanil laughed, yet not loudly enough to carry outside the small room. "Of course he is. Who else would have told you what I planned?"

"Listen to him, Zhanil, if you will not listen to me. Right now, there is nothing more I can say."

Sephil's priestly duties meant a truncated visit. Zhanil let his father walk him to the sanctuary gate and kiss him on both cheeks, but made no answer when asked to reconsider. At this, Sephil sighed and nodded. "Do as you will, but give my love to Ellina and your mother when you see them, and try to do as Adeja tells you."

During the short ride back to the palace, Zhanil wondered yet again why he had to convey messages between family members and others when they were perfectly capable of communicating with each other on their own. With his father and grandfather, he understood their discord, as he was the cause of it, but his parents should have had a warmer relationship than they did. A long time ago, he recalled, they had been affectionate, and his father had spent more time in the palace. Now they were simply cordial, and his father's preferred home was the sanctuary of Abh.

As he meant to visit them anyway, Zhanil gave his father's message to his mother and sister, and spent an hour with them as they sewed in the company of their ladies. Even had they been alone, he would not have mentioned his plans, but did mention that he intended to go for a time to his greatuncle's estate in Ottabia.

"How dull," commented Ellina. "There is nothing in Ottabia but hills and shrines."

"There are also cattle, and olive trees and goats do very well there. Olmor means to let me try my hand at governing the manor," replied Zhanil. Despite what his father claimed, he made certain to use correct speech at court and in front of his mother and thirteen-year-old sister. "I have been doing well managing my own household, so I look forward to the opportunity."

"In a month you will be bored," she said.

Zhanil laughed. "In a month, you will see some handsome boy at court, and forget you even have a brother."

Ellina glanced up from her needlework, blushed, and immediately lowered her eyes again. "Maybe Arjuna can visit while you are away."

"Ah, so you think he is handsome," he teased.

"Ellina," their mother said sharply, "Arjuna is a soldier's son, and not suitable company for a princess."

Zhanil had long suspected that Ketalya did not like Arjuna on account of his father, who made no attempt to be genteel.

Arjuna himself was always polite and reserved, usually with his nose buried in a book. "Mother," he replied, giving his chastised sister a reassuring smile, "Ellina is only joking. She knows you and Father have some grand dynastic marriage planned for her. Besides, Arjuna is going into the academy in a few days and would not be able to visit, anyway."

For the next hour, he maintained a light banter with his mother, sister, and the younger ladies-in-waiting who fluttered their eyelashes and offered surreptitious smiles when Ketalya was not looking. Secretly, he remained troubled, torn between taking the advice both his father and Adeja had given him, and proceeding with the task he knew must be undertaken. *It's a fool's errand, I know*, he thought, *but I must know for myself what the situation is in Rhodeen. When the time comes—if it comes—I'm not going into this blind*.

That evening, Zhanil invited Arjuna to dine with him. Upon his majority, his grandfather had arranged for him to move into a modest suite of apartments, and to receive an allowance drawn from the privy purse. His mother found him a reliable steward to manage his funds and staff, while Adeja continued to supervise his bodyguards and all other security arrangements. Zhanil enjoyed the freedom of an independent household, though he heeded Adeja's warning that some of the servants were spies.

"Do not confront them or try to replace them," said Adeja. "They work for your grandfather and are no threat to you. Whatever you wish to keep secret, make sure you don't put it in writing. Even if you lock it away at night, you can be sure the servants will find the key and read what you write, even those endless lists of yours."

During the meal, Zhanil took care not to embarrass his friend by mentioning Ellina's youthful infatuation with him; the servants would only carry the tale back to Ampheres, if he did not know already. Instead, he discussed his upcoming trip to Ottabia, omitting any mention of Rhodeen and the Turyar, and apologized for an earlier slight which he knew had troubled Arjuna.

"I wanted you and your parents at my birthday banquet, you know I did," he said, "but my mother and grandfather insisted only blood relations and high-ranking nobles were to be invited. I had nothing to say about it."

Arjuna, dropping his head, murmured something unintelligible. At that moment, Zhanil felt as guilty as when he first told his friend that neither he nor his parents were on the guest list, and wondered if he should have said anything at all.

"It was horrible," he added, with a small laugh. *Smile, Arjuna, and tell me it's all right, that you understand*. "I've never been so bored in my life, and that's counting all those dry lessons in geography and language. I had to sit on the dais next to Grandfather for half the night greeting courtiers I didn't know and smiling at their empty-headed daughters. I wanted you there, but it would have bored you to death. You're fortunate you didn't come."

"I'm sure," Arjuna said quietly. His neutral expression did not change.

Drop the subject, or he will tell you what he really thinks. "This private supper is much more enjoyable, believe me." Zhanil signaled to the servants to refill Arjuna's wine cup and bring out the first course. "I can't believe you're actually going into the academy."

Arjuna, shaking his head, dismissed the subject. "Please don't remind me. Father isn't giving me any choice."

"You should do very well," said Zhanil. Arjuna was tall and athletic like his father, and more than capable of holding his own in a fight, yet expressed little interest in military life. "Tonight we celebrate my birthday and your new career. Alassil, would you bring in the entertainment?"

The steward ushered in a comely youth and two girls, three of the many pleasure slaves maintained by the palace for visiting dignitaries and the elite. When a startled Arjuna sat up in his chair, Zhanil smiled and winked. "Go ahead and choose one."

"But you've never shared—"

"You're a guest, and I'm being a good host," said Zhanil.

Arjuna hesitated. "My parents work in the royal establishment. That hardly makes me a guest."

Zhanil began to feel the first twinges of impatience. "If you're sitting at my table eating my food and drinking my wine, you're a guest. Now choose one before I have Alassil go down to the scullery and bring back the ugliest girl he can find."

"If you say so, but only because you insist." Arjuna chose a slender, dark-haired girl with bells on her ankles. Zhanil was tempted to take a girl also, but even as his eyes lingered over the remaining girl he recalled his grandfather's admonishments to be careful about where he spent his seed.

Sometimes Zhanil had a girl massage him with fragrant oils and suck his cock, but tonight he wanted more than that. Rather than the willowy girl he preferred, he settled on the other, a lissome young man with golden skin and full lips, and led him by the hand to his bedchamber while Arjuna took his girl to a cushioned divan in the corner.

Zhanil enjoyed a youth's taut nipples and firm ass as much as any man might, but whenever he had a boy he found he did not give as much attention to his partner's pleasure. The girls he always kissed and caressed, so they came even if he did not penetrate them.

I should've chosen a girl and just done with her what I always do, he thought, listening to the murmurs and soft moans Arjuna and the girl made as they kissed and fondled each other on the opposite end of the room. "What is your name?" he asked his partner.

"Imbri, sir," said the young man. Rising to his knees, he arched his back and lifted his garment over his head. Underneath, he wore nothing. "What is your pleasure, sir?"

Zhanil took his time about undressing, letting his gaze travel over his partner's body; his imagination supplied enough variations to stir his desire. "Make me ready for you, and then we'll see."

Climbing onto the bed, he covered Imbri's mouth with his, slipping his tongue between willing lips before leaning back among the cushions. Imbri dropped to all fours, then slid sinuously between Zhanil's legs, his buttocks teasing the air,

and went to work, licking and sucking. Zhanil watched, smiling when he remembered that girls could not get as much cock in their mouths, and gave himself over to the pleasurable sensations in his groin until he knew he was about to come.

From the corner of his eye, he saw Arjuna busy between the girl's legs, rubbing her as she moaned; the bells on her ankles jingled as she writhed under him. That Arjuna had such skill surprised Zhanil, who had never even seen him talk to a girl aside from the bashful answers he gave whenever Ellina tried to get his attention. Then again, with a father like Adeja, Arjuna had probably seen the inside of a brothel the moment his voice changed.

Zhanil drew Imbri up onto his chest to share a lingering kiss. "How do you want me in you?"

Imbri seemed confounded by the question. "However you like, sir."

In the end, he took Imbri from behind, one hand gripping the young man's waist for balance as he thrust, while the other grasped Imbri's cock and stroked in time with his movements until he felt a rush of warmth spurt into his fingers. He heard a moan, and felt the young man's body shudder and clench around his buried cock. Zhanil thrust once, twice, and came with a loud groan.

Once his partner bathed him with a warm, damp cloth from the sideboard, and he saw that Arjuna was also spent, Zhanil dismissed the slaves and sprawled out across the bed in a comfortable haze of exhaustion. Sometimes he kept his partner with him, but with company present he decided against it.

"You didn't answer my question before," he said to Arjuna. "Why did your father enroll you in the academy? You've already had military training." Some things Zhanil knew from Adeja, but the man did not discuss family matters with him and Arjuna would not volunteer the information without prompting. While he thought he could guess the reason, he preferred to hear the truth firsthand.

"Father wants me to have a good job in the army," replied Arjuna, "and for that he insists I need the proper credentials. He's set on my being an officer."

Even after nineteen years of service, Adeja's own lack of Khalgari military credentials presented a problem at court. Zhanil understood and agreed with his good intentions for his son, yet at the same time sympathized with Arjuna. "You can still tell him no."

"And he can still take me across his knee and thrash me, which he's threatened to do," said Arjuna. "Mother doesn't want me to go, but he insists. He says there are plenty of jobs in the military for bookish types. They argue about it sometimes."

Zhanil chewed his lip for a moment, climbed out of bed, and crept to the door, opening it slightly to make certain no one was listening at the keyhole. "I've something to tell you," he said. Crouching down beside the divan, he leaned close and whispered, "I know I said I was going to Ottabia. I'm still going, but then Adeja and I are crossing the border into Rhodeen." Arjuna's eyes widened, and he started to sit up and speak. Zhanil made shushing noises while placing a hand on Arjuna's shoulder to steady him. "Not so loudly," he said, murmuring against the lip of Arjuna's ear. "Father is the only one who knows about it. I can't risk having my grandfather find out."

"Are you mad?" Arjuna whispered back. "The Turyar will kill you."

"They won't even know we were there. I just want to see how the people are living under the Turyar, if it's even worth it to plan an invasion, should the time come for that."

"You could get spies to tell you those things. You're a fool for putting yourself in danger like this. Men will try to kill you," said Arjuna.

"They try to kill me now." Zhanil climbed onto the divan beside him. "I'm not worried. I'm not going to tell anyone who I am. Khalgari merchants and travelers have been going in and out of Rhodeen for ten years now. I've heard the roads are safer now under the Turyar than they ever were before."

Arjuna did not look convinced. "They're supposed to be your enemies."

Hugging his knees to his chest, Zhanil thought hard for a moment before answering. "It's a complicated situation, Arjuna. They acknowledge me as a member of the Khalgari royal family, nothing else. We have a strong army, and fifty years ago both my grandfathers defeated the Turyar at the Irrend Pass, but now we maintain neutral relations with them because we can't afford to fight both them *and* Tajhaan. So they're not exactly our friends, but not officially enemies either. From what little I've heard, they've intermarried into Rhodeen society, become part of it. It might already be too late to drive them out. I don't know, only that I need to go and see for myself."

"I still think you've lost your mind," said Arjuna.

"You'd say that about your best friend?"

With his teasing tone, Zhanil meant to only lighten the mood, but when Arjuna did not reciprocate he realized that in trying to reassure others, he gave the impression that he was not taking the matter as seriously as he ought. "Yes," he admitted quietly, "it's foolish, but there are some things a man simply has to see with his own eyes. My father doesn't understand that, and neither does yours."

"And neither do I," added Arjuna.

Zhanil nodded, suddenly weary of the explanations, the attempts to articulate his convictions. Of all the people who should have understood his motives, he felt certain it would have been Arjuna.

There had been a time when they were inseparable, sharing secrets as well as toys. Now Zhanil counted himself fortunate if he could decipher what Arjuna thought or felt at any given moment. He could not even recall when Arjuna had started to become so secretive, so distant. Perhaps it had happened so gradually that, like the passing of one season into the next, he never noticed.

* * * *

Quiet enfolded the sanctuary like a soft blanket, tempting its residents to sleep. In his cell, Sephil remained restless, unable to lie down and close his eyes as he intended. Instead, he knelt on the floor beside his cot and tried to meditate, to yield his fears to the god and cleanse himself, until he realized that Abh could not soothe what ailed him.

Had he the power to make Zhanil see the foolishness of his errand, he would, but, like Adeja, he knew all too well that the young heeded only their own experience, not the wisdom of their elders. Sephil had said all he could, revealed more than he wanted, and now he could do nothing but wait. At eighteen, Zhanil could make his own decisions, however rash they were.

The knowledge tormented Sephil. The tenets of Abh urged him to surrender all temporal concerns in search of spiritual enlightenment, yet while he could give up material comforts, Sephil found it difficult to deny his emotions. Zhanil was his only son, his own blood, and he could not turn away. More than anything, he wanted to lock Zhanil in his apartments until the boy saw reason, as he knew his wife would have done.

For that reason, he did not tell her what their son intended to do.

Zhanil now occupied a world beyond the nursery, with adult choices and consequences. Danger could find its way past the thickest walls, the sturdiest locks and most diligent guards. Staying at home in Bhellin did not necessarily mean he would remain safe.

His parents had lived with the knowledge since before Zhanil's birth. Both remembered each attempt on his life as surely as if the assassins had struck at them, and nothing could erase the horror of the last. After thirteen years, only

random images stayed with Sephil, yet they were enough: blood and gore spattered over the walls, more blood pooling around the dead man, who scarcely looked human after Adeja had finished with him, and the rage burning in Adeja's eyes, mingled with traces of the fever that had kept him from his post to begin with.

Dreading what he would find, Sephil had had to force himself to step through the blood and into the nursery. Adeja held his sobbing son, stopping the wound with his own hands, while Zhanil stood motionless in the corner, dark eyes huge with shock, fixed on the crimson smears on the doorjamb; he said nothing, not even when Sephil gathered him into his arms and held him close.

What the men did not say, the women did. Arjuna's mother never saw the terrible scene, never knew how close her son came to death, but Ketalya, pregnant with Ellina, nearly miscarried from fright, and flew into a towering rage as soon as she recovered. Because she could not punish the assassin or those who sent him, or evict Adeja, who was only doing his duty by killing the man, she turned on her husband instead, silently reproaching him for bringing the specter of violence into their household.

You knew when you accepted me in marriage that I was an heir without a kingdom, a prince with mortal enemies, he thought, but he never spoke the words aloud. Ketalya had known only what her father told her, and by the time she learned the rest, it had been too late for her to reconsider.

From that day, a measure of warmth died between them. Not knowing what else to do, Sephil turned to the religion

that gave him comfort and withdrew from their household for as much of the year as propriety and his father-in-law would allow.

Perhaps the move had drawn attention away from Zhanil, as he hoped, but suspected the credit for the ensuing years of peace belonged to Ampheres, whose response to the attempt on his grandson's life had been to close the Tajhaani embassy, evict all the ambassadors, and threaten military action should another such incident occur. While Zhanil remained a child, his enemies in Tajhaan had stayed their hand, yet now that he was an adult who could thwart their dynastic ambitions, his life would be in danger once more.

No walls or guards can protect him from what is coming, not forever. Sephil leaned his head against his folded hands. Zhanil is a man now, and will stay or go as he believes he must do, but if he dies his mother will blame me as surely as if I had sent him.

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Chapter Two

Zhanil let his gaze roam the drab hills. "How soon will we know?"

"When the people we meet have lighter skin and speak your father's tongue, or Turya," answered Adeja. "I suspect it's a mix now. At any rate, you'd better start using the names we agreed on."

Traveling from Bhellin to the estate in Ottabia took ten uneventful days. Once there, necessity required that Zhanil's great-uncle know about their intentions. As Zhanil expected, Olmor did not like the idea at all, but agreed to help since there was nothing else he could do.

The scene was repeated at the nearby sanctuary of Abh, with an elderly chief priest who expressed his disapproval with withering glances. Bedren also had no choice, and took in the six members of Zhanil's party who would stay behind while their prince crossed the border.

Four more days found Zhanil and his three guards in the midst of an endless hill country. Brown even in the greenest months, Ottabia's only wealth came from olive groves and goat pastures, yet the trails were silent, the trees stripped by the season. As the sky loomed gray overhead and the air bit cold through their layers of woolen clothing, Zhanil expected Adeja to chastise him for choosing to travel in the autumn.

When he heard this, Adeja laughed. "Rhodeen is a pleasant country in the spring and summer. This weather means you won't tarry on the road."

Once again, Zhanil looked out over the hills. "I had no idea Ottabia was so vast."

"I've only been this way once, but as I recall it's about three weeks on foot," said Adeja. "We should cross the border in two or three more days if we keep up this pace."

A few days later, the hills gave way to a broad, flat country. White tendrils of smoke in the distance marked the presence of a town, the first habitation Zhanil and his companions had seen since leaving the sanctuary a week earlier. Although the buildings were laid out in a haphazard fashion, with little thought for the streets that must run between them, Zhanil found the town's rustic flavor a welcome alternative to spending yet another night in the cold.

A passerby informed them they were in Meduin, a small town in northernmost Rhodeen. Those whom they approached greeted them warily at first, then more warmly when they revealed themselves to be Khalgari travelers delivering news and parcels to a town further south. "This is Lakhun," said Adeja, motioning to Zhanil, "and those two men are Amset and Nahar, the boy's uncles. I'm Rajeev."

Zhanil nodded as he was introduced, wondering yet again what private joke Adeja was enjoying at his father-in-law's expense.

The innkeeper who served them ale and hot barley bread narrowed his eyes at the name Adeja gave. "You're Tajhaani?" he asked.

"Only my mother," said Adeja. "She married a Khalgari officer who stole her out of her father's house and carried her off to a life counting goats and pressing olives in Ottabia. My father was against it, of course, but she insisted on giving me a Tajhaani name. We don't see her people up in Khalgar anymore, and hardly have news of them."

As the man's wariness returned, Zhanil privately questioned the wisdom of giving a Tajhaani name. As Adeja explained it, he could not entirely disguise his birth, so he must concoct a story that incorporated it without raising suspicion. *Well, you've certainly told a tale*, thought Zhanil, *but I'm not so certain he believed you*. "The king threw them out years ago," he added.

A hand cuffed his ear, and Amset's gruff voice followed. "Your father told you to keep your mouth shut this trip, boy. These men don't want to hear your prattling."

The innkeeper's eyes darted from them to Adeja. "As long as you're with Khalgar, there'll be no trouble. Any Tajhaani who come this way are raiders looking to burn our crofts and demand our loyalty."

"Loyalty to whom?" asked Nahar, taking the platter the man offered him.

The man shrugged. "A prince from the old line who wants to be king," he said. "The towns further south have it much worse than we do, so I can't complain."

A discreet nudge under the table kept Zhanil from saying anything; it might have come from Adeja, but he could not be sure. Adeja was not even looking at him, but staring into his drink with a look of bewilderment so convincing Zhanil halfway believed it. "I thought the old line was dead."

"They might as well be," said the innkeeper.

"Surely *turkan* Arzhati and his men protect you from these raiders? I wouldn't want to encounter them on our way to Gessit."

Rather than answer, the innkeeper gruffly left their table to attend to another customer. Zhanil resisted the urge to look over at Adeja or ask what was wrong, but he had to wonder if perhaps too much had been said too quickly. "Good bread," he mumbled, shoving another piece into his mouth.

Beside him, Amset and Nahar hunched over their meals. This can't be good, thought Zhanil. If we have to ride hard back across the border, there better not be any Turyar around.

A moment later, the innkeeper returned with a pitcher to refill their tankards. "We've men on patrol if you want an escort," he said, "but it might cost you. They've their own route to look to."

Adeja shook his head. "We wouldn't want to impose," he replied. "It's just four of us and a few bolts of wool, and it doesn't seem like a good time of year to be raiding."

Amset reached up, tugged the innkeeper's sleeve and asked, "If we wanted some female company while we were here, where would we go?"

In any other place, this might have been a good question to ask, but as the man's face grew tight Zhanil realized his companion had somehow given offense; the innkeeper's reply only confirmed it. "We don't have brothels anymore. You won't find a single whore in all Rhodeen, if that's what you're looking for. The Turyar stopped that practice twenty years ago."

Adeja did not have to feign surprise. "How is that?

"It's an immoral practice, selling flesh," replied the man. "Those women were driven out, or made to take husbands and become honest wives. As for the boys, I couldn't tell you. It's the Turya way, and our wives and daughters are grateful for it."

Nahar whistled under his breath. "My woman will never believe it when I tell her."

Two silver pieces bought a room with warm beds and a brazier in the corner. Zhanil shut the door, leaned against it, and scowled at his companions. "Try to watch what you say," he hissed. "That man doesn't like us, and on our way up here I saw two men who look like Turya warriors."

Furthering his annoyance, Adeja seemed unconcerned. "Those are mere sentries, if they're Turyar at all. As for the innkeeper, that's the breed. They get fools who drink too much, don't pay their tabs, harass their daughters and make lousy conversation."

"And he thinks you're set to do two of those things," said Zhanil. "Don't ask any more questions or he'll suspect something."

Adeja unbuckled his sword belt and laid it across one of the beds; the weapon was downstairs, safely locked away in accordance with the town's ordinance that only sentries should carry arms. "Your nerves will give us away sooner than my questions."

"You told him you were Tajhaani."

"No, I confessed to being a half-breed, and believe me, he would've been far more suspicious if I'd pretended

otherwise," replied Adeja. "I've played this game for more years than you've been alive, and as long as I'm no threat to him, all the innkeeper is going to care about is my money. Rajeev ked Akubar is a harmless, talkative old guide on his way to Gessit with a green boy and his two uncles, nothing more."

A basin and pitcher stood on the table by the window; both were empty, and no linens had been supplied. Zhanil waited, then seeing no one else intended to go, ventured out on his own.

He hoped to find a servant, or at least warm water to which he could help himself, but after a fruitless search was forced to go downstairs in search of the innkeeper.

To his surprise, the man assumed a more sympathetic air, and even offered his name, which was Deros. "A silver piece will buy you a hot bath," he said. "From the smell of you, you and your friends haven't bathed since you left Khalgar. As for the women, I know what it is to be young and lively, but there's nothing I can offer you for that."

Zhanil nodded. "We haven't seen a settlement in seven days, so a proper bath will be welcome. If old Rajeev offended you, I'm sorry about that. He likes his beer and he likes his women. My father and uncles have been trying for years to get him to take a proper wife."

"Well, he won't find one here," said Deros. Taking Zhanil's pitcher, he motioned him into the kitchen, where a fire burned warmly on the hearth. With a cloth, Deros removed a kettle, set it on the hearthstones and placed the pitcher beside it. "Wait a moment for the water to cool a bit. The girls here all prefer Turya boys. They wash and comb their hair before coming around, and they show respect."

This was not information Zhanil expected to learn, and he leaned forward with genuine interest. "I'd do the same if I was courting a girl," he said, "but aren't the girls afraid of the Turya men? I heard they were fierce warriors."

Deros lifted the kettle lid, tested the water with the tip of a leathery finger, and pronounced it cool enough to pour into the pitcher. "They bring rich bride gifts, and they make loyal kinsmen. My daughters both have Turya men for husbands, and they've no complaints. Now do you want a real bath? My wife can launder your clothes for you, too, for a bit extra."

"I'll ask the others," answered Zhanil. "But I know I'd like a bath."

An hour later, the four men relaxed in a huge wooden tub in a room floored with heated tiles; it was more rustic than the sophisticated Khalgari bathhouses of Bhellin, but no less welcome. Deros' wife supplied soap, pumice and towels, while brusquely informing the men that they would have to scrub themselves.

As she left, two other men came into the room, stripped off their clothes, and entered the tub. They were tall, fairhaired, and, judging from the way Adeja tensed at sight of them, obviously Turyar.

For several minutes, all conversation ceased, the tension palpable in the steaming air as each group avoided looking at the other. Finally, one of the Turya men spoke, "You are the men from Khalgar." Zhanil could barely make out anything through the man's thick accent; the ambassadors who came to his grandfather's court were far more polished, their accents more an amusing curiosity than an impediment. "Yes, sir," he replied. "We're from Ottabia."

"Deros says you're going to Gessit. If you want protection, a man can ride with you."

Normally, Adeja would have spoken, deftly negotiating or refusing an offer, yet when Zhanil realized his mentor was not going to say anything, and that neither Amset nor Nahar would presume to make arrangements without his approval, he knew he would have do this unaided. "I thought it was safe to travel in Rhodeen."

The man smiled at him, revealing a flash of square white teeth. "There is no danger from the local people, but you can never be sure with Tajhaani raiders. The sentries know what to look for, and how to avoid them."

"Well, that's very kind of you," said Zhanil, "but I know my uncles and I wouldn't want to impose. Surely the people here need you?"

"We have a duty to escort travelers. In the great cities, and in the west country, there is no danger, but these Tajhaani are not friends, not even to foreigners like you." Without turning his head, the man's gaze slid sidelong to Adeja, who at last found his voice.

"I was born in Khalgar," he said tightly.

The man nodded. "But who on the road will stop to ask you, if they mistake you for a raider?" He turned once again to Zhanil. "You are safer with an escort. Your guide and your uncles will agree."

Under the soapy water, Zhanil placed a hand on Adeja's thigh to steady him. "How much would you want? It can't be very far to Gessit."

"If you leave in the morning, you will get there by afternoon," replied the man. "But there is no fee. In the Turya-lands, we do not always deal in money or goods. A man who rides and bears arms has obligations. When you are ready to go, someone will take you."

Unable to refuse without drawing suspicion, Zhanil agreed. He and his companions finished their bath under the scrutiny of the two Turyar, who remained in the tub, and retreated upstairs. Once safely in their room, the incident drew the criticism Zhanil anticipated.

"There was nothing else I could do," he said, before Adeja could speak.

Adeja glared at him. "They know something, you can be sure of it. Maybe they suspected before, but now that you've gone and done the negotiating for us, they *definitely* know."

"Well, when the reliable old Tajhaani guide and the two uncles—" Zhanil glared at Amset and Nahar, who were drying their damp hair with towels "—*don't* say anything, what am I supposed to do? One Turya is going to ride with us, not an entire party. Surely you can handle that?"

"You'd better pray it *isn't* an entire party of them, and that they aren't taking us somewhere to be killed on the sly."

That night, Zhanil slept uneasily next to Adeja in one narrow bed, while Amset and Nahar, both sound sleepers,

shared the other. After what felt like several hours, Adeja finally broke the silence.

"I don't know what's going to happen tomorrow anymore than you do," he admitted. "It isn't your fault. If they're suspicious, it's because of me. I should have stayed behind."

Zhanil stared up at the rafters. "It's too late for that now."

Deros served a breakfast of hot porridge and ale in the common room; the fare was as simple and tasty as anything Zhanil would have eaten on Olmor's estate, but without his great-uncle's dull conversation. At the door, the innkeeper wished him well and returned the weapons confiscated last night.

"Your escort is outside," said Deros. "His name is Hattu. If you keep him waiting any longer, he'll come in and fetch you."

It's just one man, not half an army. Zhanil resisted the compulsion to turn and give Adeja a knowing look. "We'll be back this way in a day or two."

"I'll look for your return," replied Deros.

As they stepped out into the frosty morning air, Zhanil saw their escort. Hattu towered over them, his blond hair pulled into a plait as thick as a child's arm. Though clearly a warrior, he sported no tattoos, did not wear animal skins, and looked nothing like the wild horsemen who populated Adeja's stories. As he stood among the horses, however, Hattu seemed more comfortable with them than with the newcomers who approached offering wary greetings.

"Gessit is several hours from here," he said, with a heavy accent. "Travelers should not arrive after dark, so we waste no time."

"We'll have enough daylight," answered Amset. "Winter isn't yet upon us."

It might not have been winter, but close enough to it to make traveling unpleasant. Zhanil did not know about the more populated regions, but this part of Rhodeen had carttracks, not roads, which a good downpour would turn into a muddy quagmire. On all sides, the fields lay fallow, the orchards stripped bare; it would have been interesting to watch how the people worked the land, to see what they grew and if it was enough to sustain them.

Zhanil found his father's inability to answer the most basic questions about Rhodeen puzzling. When pressed, Sephil said only that he had seen little of life outside the palace, and even less of how people lived outside Shemin-at-Khul. "Your grandfather Brasidios thought I was too frail and simpleminded to go out," he explained. "Your grandmother died when I was born, and I did not thrive like your Uncle Zhanil. I could not ride a horse or wield a sword as he did, and I did not perform very well in the schoolroom."

As he rarely saw his father without a book in his hand, Zhanil found the latter difficult to believe. "But you are a very good priest."

Sephil shrugged. "I did not always have a vocation, and your grandfather had a low opinion of priests."

Adeja might have been able to tell him something about the land and the people they passed, but the older man was determined to remain silent, hunched down in his saddle and avoiding all eye contact with Hattu. Zhanil briefly contemplated asking the Turya directly, but judged it unwise since Hattu was not particularly loquacious and might regard too many questions as suspicious.

In the late afternoon, as gray clouds veiled the sun and threatened rain, they reached Gessit. Zhanil noted the similarities to Meduin: half-timbered buildings laid in a haphazard pattern, dirt paths between some, cobblestone lanes between others; he guessed that all towns in Rhodeen probably followed this pattern.

Hattu led them to an inn where, to allay his suspicions, Adeja stirred from his stupor and conversed with the innkeeper and his wife, sharing news and offering the woolen cloth as payment.

"We'll be heading back in the morning," he said, speaking to the Turya for the first time that day.

Hattu lifted an eyebrow. "Shemash told me you had kin here. You told him so last night, no?"

Amset approached with a cup of ale, sat down on the bench beside him, and offered an explanation. "Yes, we did, but they aren't here. While Rajeev was talking to the innkeeper, I asked around and was told that our cousins have moved south to Cassiare for protection. If winter wasn't so close, I'd say we continue on south since we've already come this far, but I'm afraid it'll have to wait until spring."

Later, in the privy, Amset told Zhanil that half his story was true. "Several families *have* moved to the cities because of the Tajhaani threat, so if this Turya wants to ask questions, he'll be able to verify that much. Personally, he doesn't look that bright."

"I wouldn't judge him so quickly," replied Zhanil.

Over a meal of rich broth and barley bread, Zhanil observed the people coming and going through the inn's common room. The older folk did not seem afraid of Hattu, and many of the younger people showed signs of mixed blood, with names Zhanil did not recognize as traditional Rhodeen ones.

During the night, he woke to the soothing patter of rain outside, and drifted back to sleep hazily wondering about mud on the road the next day.

Morning dawned gray and damp; the downpour had ceased before sunrise, which Zhanil counted as a small blessing. In Khalgar, roads of compacted layers of gravel, charcoal, and stone ensured easy passage throughout the year; only backwater regions like Ottabia were impassable during the winter and early spring.

"If we keep a good pace," said Adeja, motioning to the dark clouds on the horizon, "we might avoid the next shower."

They would have ridden through the afternoon meal, had Hattu not insisted on stopping for a half-hour to rest the horses. "A little water will not hurt you, if we get caught by the rain," he said, "but a wise man does not neglect his horse."

"The boy's parents will throttle us if he catches a chill." Nahar indicated Zhanil, who humored the lie with a sheepish look.

Hattu frowned at him. "If young men are so fragile in your land, then you should have left him at home or waited for summer. Turyar ride in all seasons, in all weather. It is nothing to us."

Zhanil ducked his head, pretending to be embarrassed by the slight, while making a mental note of the information.

Sometime in the mid-afternoon, Hattu halted on the road and signaled for silence. Turning his gaze from a clump of skeletal trees to a broad field, he squinted and peered into the thin mist. "We are close," he said, "but something is not right."

Zhanil followed his line of sight, trying to see what alarmed him, yet there was nothing. On either side of him, Amset and Nahar did the same.

"Listen," Nahar finally said.

Shouts rose in the distance. "Is the town under attack?" asked Zhanil.

Adeja narrowed his eyes, concentrating on a distant movement in the mist. "It sounds like Tajhaani, but I can't make out what they're saying. Three voices, at least, maybe more."

"We go closer," said Hattu, "but not too much. There may be as many as twenty, and we are alone in the open."

Forty yards down the road, Zhanil had his first glimpse of the commotion. Eight men on horses had corralled a group of townsfolk whose bundles indicated they had ventured out to gather kindling. With weapons drawn, the men shouted at the peoples, who huddled in terror among the snorting, stomping horses. "What are they doing?"

"Demanding loyalty for their prince," said Hattu. "They wave their weapons and make noise, and usually this is all, but sometimes they do more. They may kill or maim a few people, or burn houses if the people will not swear or offer gifts."

"Where are your sentries?" asked Adeja.

Hattu twisted in the saddle to glare at him, and for a moment the threat of violence hung in the air between them. "The people are told not to go out without guards, but they do not always listen, and there are not always enough men to watch all the approaches."

Drawing his sword, and ignoring Adeja's disapproving look, Zhanil moved his mount between them. "We're with you," he said to Hattu, "if you want to help them."

* * * *

Eight men, and where were the Turya sentries who were supposed to enforce *turkan* Arzhati's peace and protect the town? The Tajhaani who threatened Meduin were no casual raiders, cutthroats culled from the gutters of High Prince Armajid's kingdom, but skilled horse archers, perhaps the only soldiers who could get past the Turyar and complete their mission.

And now Zhanil proposed meeting them in battle. *What is he thinking*? wondered Adeja. *Has he lost all common sense*? It would have been far more prudent to skirt through the mist, avoiding all contact with the Tajhaani, go back to the town, and raise the alarm as a genuine merchant's son with

no military training would have done. But no, instead Zhanil took his cues from the Turya, who was clearly torn in his loyalties between protecting his charges and his people.

These are the same Turyar who slaughtered your family and took your throne. Who taught you to pity them? "Foolish boy," barked Adeja. "What're a few merchants like us against them?"

"We have to," answered Zhanil, in a tone that said: *I* command you.

Now is no time to play the hero. "Lakhun," began Amset, "your parents won't like this. We promised we'd keep you out of trouble."

Tajhaani voices carried across the open fields, where Adeja realized how in their frenzy the archers forgot to translate their demands. The townsfolk, not understanding what their assailants wanted, cowered and failed to respond, yet apparently the archers never realized this. Adeja shook his head, recalling how dense many Tajhaani soldiers could be.

"They're not smart, but they won't be easy to take down," he told Hattu. "They have bows."

In response, Hattu drew the composite bow for which the Turyar were both famed and feared, fitted an arrow, and sighted along the shaft. "So do we," he replied, letting the arrow fly with his words.

Forty yards meant nothing to a Turya archer. Hattu's shot took the nearest man through the back of the head. Twitching, the rider toppled soundlessly from his horse, landing almost on top of the stricken townsfolk, who saw the newcomers in the distance and fell on their faces beside the corpse to avoid being struck in the crossfire.

Swords flashed as the Tajhaani turned, and two set arrows to their bowstrings. Whether they could shoot across such a distance, Adeja had no intention of waiting to find out. "Run them down!" he shouted. A javelin would have been welcome at that moment, but he did what he could with his sword.

Had he been facing a more substantial force, he would have been dead before he moved ten feet. Instead, he dropped his head and upper body as he urged his horse forward, hearing the distant recoil of three or more bowstrings that sent arrows piercing through the air. One thudded into a target; he heard a horse spill heavily to the ground, but could not stop to see who had been struck.

Once he was close enough, Adeja came up, slicing a horse across the throat, sending both beast and rider to the ground in a tangle of thrashing limbs. Turning, he stared down the sight of a Tajhaani bow and an arrow clearly meant for him. He caught his breath and brought up his sword a half-second before Hattu's arrow took the man through the eye.

Blood sprayed out the back of the man's head and he fell, but the townsfolk were no longer underfoot. Seizing their chance, they ran in what Adeja assumed was the direction of the town. They might even have raised the alarm, for through the mist he thought he saw motion, as though someone had heard the noise and was coming.

A cry off to the right brought his attention back to the battle. Twenty feet away, Zhanil's horse reared. Blood stained the prince's sword, but Adeja's eyes immediately went to the shaft protruding from Zhanil's collar. Zhanil gritted his teeth and grasped the arrow, letting his sword slide from his hand just as his eyes rolled back in his head. He swayed in the saddle, the reins slipping from his inert left hand, and fell to the ground, where he lay unmoving.

Adeja shouted, driving his horse forward through a pair of Tajhaani soldiers. A weight slammed into his chest, and something cold tore through his jerkin and leggings. Gasping for breath, he fell, striking the wet earth with enough force to knock the wind out of him.

His fingers scrabbled in the mud, seeking the weapon he dropped when he fell, searching for anything to grasp onto while he pulled himself up. Stinging pain in his leg made his eyes water; he clutched at his thigh and felt wetness. Throbbing filled his head; it was the blood pounding in his ears, or the drumming of approaching hooves—he could not tell which.

He managed to turn his head just enough to see Zhanil still lying prone in the mud. *If they've killed him* ... He could not finish the thought, could not think beyond the mental image of the arrow starting from the young man's shoulder and the horses that would surely trample him where he lay.

Above him, almost black against a sky bruised with coming darkness and rain, he saw a spear poised to take him through the chest.

Footfalls thundered off to his left, stopping beside him. Hattu bent over him, and he felt a hand on his chest. Even as Hattu shouted, the spear thudded to earth half an inch from Adeja's cheek. He did not remember anything more.

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Chapter Three

When Adeja woke, it was in a bed piled high with blankets and soft hides, in a room warmed by a glowing fire. The Turya woman sitting beside him at once urged him not to move too much.

"I have just stitched and bandaged your leg," she said, "so you must take care the next few days."

Blinking, he tried to concentrate on his surroundings, and to recall how he had gotten in bed with an injured leg. His memory refused to work.

She nodded. "You and your people have given me much work in the last day."

Suddenly, he pictured Zhanil, falling from his horse with an arrow starting from his shoulder. "The boy with me—"

"Yes, he is alive," she said, "but I cannot tell you more."

Anything else Adeja wanted to know, he could not discover until Amset visited him an hour later. By then, he learned that the wound in his thigh was deep, just missing the femoral artery. He had lost much blood, and even if the injury healed cleanly, he would always walk with a limp. Adeja sagged against the pillows, hating the thought of having to use a cane. Only old men did that, and though he already had more gray hairs than he liked, he was not about to admit he was old.

Fifty-three is nothing, he thought bitterly. *Father would be eighty-seven now, if he's still alive, and he's had more accidents than a man could count*.

"Nahar is cut and bruised," Amset told him, "and he fractured two ribs falling from his horse, but it's nothing. Lakhun, he's another matter."

Adeja stiffened, waiting for his lieutenant to give him the fatal news. Even now, in the sickroom, they had to carry on with the charade. "What about him? The healer won't tell me anything except that he lives."

"The arrow struck him in the collarbone," said Amset. "His heavy clothes and leather jerkin absorbed the worst of the blow, but he's weak and feverish, and Uzhena is doing her best to keep him warm and comfortable."

Uzhena must be the healer, who had not told him her name before leaving. "Is he going to die?"

"I don't think so. She says the fever is from the bump on the head he took when he hit the ground; the wound isn't infected." Amset patted the bandage on his hand. "These Turyar know more than I thought about medicine, but I'll admit I'll feel better once we were back in Khalgar. Uzhena says we can't leave until spring. I didn't say anything, of course, but—"

"We can't stay," said Adeja. "Even if we had the money, it's out of the question."

"They aren't charging us for the stay, or the medical care," replied Amset. "Uzhena told me that since we helped defend them against their enemies, the town is doing all this for free. At this point, I don't know that we have a choice. Neither you nor Lakhun is well enough to travel right now."

Once Amset left, Adeja contemplated the situation until his head began to ache. *Zhanil, curse you and your heroic*

bullshit! Now they would be trapped on the wrong side of the border for four months, with no way to communicate their whereabouts or condition to Zhanil's great-uncle. Of course, Amset or Nahar could carry a message, but the moment anyone learned that the prince had been injured, panic would ensue.

All he could do right now was to send Amset to Olmor with a message saying they would be delayed a few weeks. While the prince was a rather dull man who did not approve of the venture, he was also a sensible one, and would not become alarmed.

Adeja closed his eyes, for the first time aware that whatever drugs the Turya woman had given him, they made him groggier than he wanted to be.

A heavy downpour drummed against the windowsill when he woke, now with a fierce urge to relieve his bladder. Adeja winced as he tried to sit up, and from the bed did not see a chamber pot anywhere in the room. *She expects me to piss in my bed like some savage*, he thought sourly.

Uzhena came in bearing a tray of food just as he began to squirm. "I see you are not comfortable," she said in her heavy accent.

"You do expect me to relieve myself, don't you?"

She took her time about setting down the tray. "I have a jar for you to empty your bladder. For the other, you will need help until you are strong enough to move on your own. Now you are weak from blood loss and pain—"

"Woman," he growled, "are you going to give me that jar or not?"

Uzhena showed him the jar with its curved neck, but withheld it just long enough to irritate him further. "I do not know what they do in Khalgar, but Turyar have better respect for women."

Adeja seized the jar, wrenched off the lid and thrust it under the blankets. "I like women just fine," he said, groaning in relief as his stream ran into the jar, "when they don't tease me. If you want to court a man, you leave his bladder and bowels out of it."

She laughed, yet with little humor. "I already have a husband," she said. "You will eat now, and give me no further trouble."

Taking the jar from him, she helped him wash his hands and face, then spoon-fed him a rich, nourishing broth. "I will not do this after tomorrow," she said. "I gave you drugs for the pain while I stitched your wound. They will wear off and you will be more alert."

"And still in pain," he grumbled.

"I will give you other herbs for that, but you do not have a fever and your life is not in danger, so you are not an invalid. You will be able to shift for yourself."

Adeja wondered if all Turya women were so accommodating, and if so, how their men endured them. "How do you expect me to get about? Am I to float to the privy on wings?"

"I will give you crutches, and hope that will end your complaints."

"As long as I can ride a horse in three weeks, do what you like."

Uzhena stared at him in stunned silence. "You are in no condition to leave, and your friend is no better. When you are well enough, then we will talk about your leaving."

"When can I see Lakhun?"

"You may see him when he is awake," replied Uzhena. "I can tell you that his fever is down now. He will not die, if that is what worries you."

Her assurances offered him little comfort. With such bedside manner, it was a wonder Zhanil survived at all.

Uzhena took the jar out to empty and clean, and brought it back for later use. Adeja dozed off to the sound of the rain falling outside. When he woke, he used the jar again, submitted to a sponge bath made nearly unbearable by his nurse's sharp tongue, and had his dressing changed. As he gazed down at the wound, he could see he would have an awful scar to take home to his wife, and an even harder task trying to explain to her how he had gotten it. Lahis had no stomach for violence; nearly losing Arjuna to an assassin's knife had given her enough fright to carry her through the rest of her life. She had all the anxiety she could manage with Arjuna in the academy without having to worry about becoming a widow.

As she worked, Uzhena could not resist commenting on Adeja's other scars, including the one three inches below his present wound. "Herding goats in Khalgar must be dangerous work," she said.

Adeja swallowed the temptation to tell her he had gotten that particular scar from her own people when they sacked Mekesh twenty years ago. "Hurry up and finish, woman," he grumbled. "My balls are turning blue from the cold."

"You gripe so much," she said, "it is no wonder that you have no wife."

"The women in Khalgar like me just fine."

Uzhena slathered on a cooling antiseptic ointment, venturing somewhat closer to his groin than necessary, and applied the bandage. "There you go, you noisy man." She pulled up the coverlet. "Now you can rest and spare me your complaining."

The ointment offered some relief, but not enough. "Where is the painkiller you promised?" he asked. "These stitches hurt like death."

Sighing, she handed him a cup of steaming liquid. "Do not expect me to hold it for you while you drink," she said. "One of my brothers came home once from battle without his foot, and he did not make half as much noise as you do bawling over your little aches and pains."

Adeja made a face as he sipped at the foul-tasting liquid. "Is Amset about?"

"Which one of your companions is he?"

"The one with the short beard and brown hair," he answered. "Ugh, woman! Don't you Turyar believe in sweetening anything? If I didn't need it so badly, I'd make you drink it."

"It is better for you this way." To his surprise, she smiled. "Ah, yes, I know Amset. Aside from the boy, he is the only one among you with manners."

Adeja said nothing to her, but when his lieutenant came in, he could not resist teasing the man. "I think Uzhena likes you."

Amset pulled up a stool and sat down. "I hope not," he said earnestly. "She's Hattu's wife, and he's the only thing that kept you from being speared when the sentries mistook you for a Tajhaani raider."

So the woman with the sharp tongue belonged to the gruff warrior; it did not surprise Adeja in the least. As for the rest, the last thing he remembered about the battle was lying on the ground and something sharp striking the dirt beside his cheek. "How is Lakhun?"

"He's more alert now, but still resting. You should be able to see him tomorrow," replied Amset. "Deros just delivered some crutches for you.

While Adeja knew the mechanics of using crutches, he had not done so since his boyhood in Tajhaan, when he broke his leg falling from a tree. Sulking, he shifted his weight against the unfamiliar instruments. He balked at the way the pads chafed his armpits, and once nearly hurled the crutches against the wall in frustration, but at last with Amset's patient encouragement managed to get through the door and down the corridor to Zhanil's room.

"Say nothing," Amset warned Uzhena, who stood off to one side monitoring Adeja's progress. "He's doing well enough."

"If all Khalgari men bellow and snort like oxen," she said, "then, yes, he is doing fine. As long as he keeps the weight off his leg, I have nothing more to say."

Zhanil lay propped up against two pillows to assist his breathing, and looked as pale as the bleached hides which covered his legs. Glassy eyes stared at the wall, gradually regaining focus as Adeja maneuvered into the room; he took in the crutches, barely comprehending even as Adeja painfully shifted and eased onto the chair Amset dragged over.

"I'm lucky to have a leg," grumbled Adeja. "If you can understand me, I'd like to know what the fuck you were thinking."

It might have been too soon for such an outburst. A gentler hand would have eased into the topic, asking first how Zhanil fared, but Adeja was too irritated to give him that much quarter.

Laboring for breath, Zhanil tried to focus, yet once he comprehended the question, he at least had the decency to look contrite. "I *wasn't* thinking," he mumbled. "I don't remember much."

"You *suppose?*" hissed Adeja. "Since you've forgotten, let me remind you that you nearly got us all killed. Now neither one of us can travel, and you know what that means."

Zhanil frowned. "I hope to be well soon."

Adeja studied the bulky sling and bandages under the prince's bedclothes, judging Zhanil would be fortunate if he could move his right arm in a week, never mind staying upright on a horse. "You aren't going anywhere, not in a few days and not in a fortnight. Winter is no time to be riding around with a wound like yours, and as for my leg, I have troubles enough of my own." At this, Zhanil stirred, trying to lean forward for a better look. Amset quickly moved forward to ease him back onto the pillows. "Don't move so much," he said. "Rajeev injured his leg in the attack and has to use crutches for a time. Neither one of you will be able to ride a horse for a while."

Taking another deep breath, Zhanil could not mask his disappointment. "Adeja, I didn't know you were woun—"

"Later, boy, when you're well enough. My leg should be much better by then, though my nurse seems intent on killing me." A snort from the hallway told Adeja that Uzhena had overheard his remark; he prayed she had not noticed Zhanil's momentary slip. "You just do as you're told and rest, and I'll send a message back across the border so your family knows to expect a delay."

Once back in his own room, Adeja banished the healer but asked Amset to remain. "You heard what I told the boy. I need you to carry a message to Olmor. He doesn't need to know why we're delayed, though if he asks you can tell him something that won't give him an apoplexy."

"I can be back in less than a fortnight," said Amset. "One man on the road can ride faster than four."

Adeja shook his head. "No, wait for us at the sanctuary, and send the other men back to Olmor. Bedren might put up with them for a fortnight, but not six weeks."

Since he was well enough to move about and eat without assistance, Uzhena insisted that Adeja take his meals downstairs with everyone else. Amset and Nahar helped him down the staircase in an ordeal of grumbling and fussing that left Adeja wondering why he could not have been housed on the first floor.

The two-story boarding house to which he and his companions had been brought after the attack was shared by five families. Thirty-two people crammed into a communal dining room and sat down at two long tables overseen by the landlords, an elderly Rhodeen couple who urged the newcomers to find a place anywhere they liked.

Adeja had little taste for conversation, but when the children began pestering him for tales about Khalgar, behaving as though he was one of the flamboyant storytellers who traveled among the desert caravans and plied their trade between cities, he sighed. "You are asking an old goatherd from the hills to bore you," he told them. "I don't think you want to hear about the olive press on our farm, or the fleas in the bedstraw."

"They take you for someone more widely traveled," said a man from across the table. "It must be your Tajhaani name, or your mix of features. They have never seen anyone so dark."

"Only my mother was from Tajhaan," replied Adeja, "and when my father took her, she spent so much of the trip complaining that he nearly left her in the desert."

"Ah!" exclaimed Uzhena, who sat nearby. "So that is where you get your talent."

Adeja, wishing she would behave like a proper woman and keep her mouth shut, turned once more to the children. "I live in Ottabia, which isn't a very interesting part of Khalgar. We herd goats there, and we make goat's milk cheese and olive oil and cloth. You wouldn't like it at all."

"Deros tells me you are your group's guide here in Rhodeen," said the man. "Have you been here before?"

Taking a second look at him, Adeja noticed he was young, no more than a few years older than Zhanil, and pureblooded Turyar. His piercing blue stare made Adeja uneasy, for it implied an intelligence Hattu did not possess, and necessitated more careful answers. "My father could never stay in one place. He took me to Bhellin, and a few times to the cloth market down in Cassiare. Since I'm the only one on the farm who's ever been here, I had to come along."

"You fought rather well for simple goatherds."

"A man should know how to defend himself if he's going to travel," replied Adeja, quickly adding, "and even if he doesn't travel. Sometimes there's plenty of trouble to be had just by staying at home."

One eyebrow went up, and Adeja cursed his loose tongue. "I thought Khalgar was a peaceful kingdom," said the man.

Beside him, Amset dispelled the tension with well-timed laughter. "It is, but old Rajeev here has enough to do with the angry fathers and brothers of all the women he's seduced."

"I meant the neighbors trying to steal our goats," grumbled Adeja.

"Pity they don't try to steal you."

"It's no use. They'd just send me back in a week."

Later that night, after struggling up the stairs on his crutches and cursing the healer under his breath yet again, Adeja went to bed brooding over his conversation with the

young man, whose name he never learned. *That one suspects something*, he thought. *The sooner we leave here, the better it will be.*

* * * *

Though still weak and lightheaded, Zhanil was strong enough to leave his bed three days after the skirmish. With his arm tightly bound in a sling, he took a bath and wobbled up and down the corridor for exercise, leaning on Nahar for support. Adeja encouraged his efforts from a nearby chair. Zhanil smiled to let him know everything was all right, but felt too guilty to speak.

All this is your fault, he thought. Gods, what were you thinking, taking a chance like that? It had been an impulse, alternately fueled by Hattu's concern, a genuine desire to assist, and the need to negate any lingering suspicions. If you live long enough for there to be a next time, do as Adeja tells you and stay out of it.

When he asked about his injury, Uzhena told him he would have a scar, which he knew he could not hide from his servants. Someone would inevitably report the injury to his grandfather, and then he would have to explain.

Still leaning on Nahar, the following day Zhanil braved the stairs and went down to the dining room to eat with the boarding house's residents. Most of the younger folk had the mixed blood he had come to expect, with a handful of pureblooded Turya among them.

You're even more mixed than they are, he thought. Despite his claim to the throne, he had only one-quarter

Rhodeen blood, which came from his grandfather Brasidios. All the rest was Khalgari.

Zhanil enjoyed spending time with the young children, who were housebound and restless as the rain started to fall again. While their mothers went about their tasks, he stayed in the common sitting room with them and an older girl whose job it was to watch the little ones. A few boys wanted to run and climb the furniture, which was not allowed, but when reprimanded were obedient and eager to hear stories.

"Then I'll tell you a story," said the girl.

"We've *heard* your stories, Yhade," said one of the boys, "and you don't tell them good."

"Be nice to her," warned Zhanil.

Right away, the children turned to him, which he had not intended, and pressed him for entertainment. "I'm not a very good storyteller," he protested. Unfortunately, his attempts to refuse only made them plead harder and threaten to grow unruly again until he finally relented. "But if I *do* tell you a story," he said, "you have to tell me one in return."

Khalgar was rich in tales of kings, heroes and gods, and for his subject Zhanil selected Arkanti, a prince wrongfully banished by his father through the treachery of an evil cousin, unable to return until he completed an impossible task. Zhanil had not been lying to the children: he did not consider himself much of a storyteller, and even to his own ears his delivery lacked the drama of the professional bards who performed at his grandfather's court. Nonetheless, the children seemed interested enough that his confidence grew through the telling. Once, as he lifted his good arm to pantomime the duel between Arkanti and his duplicitous cousin, his gaze fell upon a tall figure in the doorway, an adult listener who seemed more intent on him than on the children or the story he told. Flustered, Zhanil struggled to maintain his rhythm as he finished the scene, and ended his tale with the reconciliation of Arkanti and his father, and the marriage of the prince and the beautiful princess he had rescued during his travels and brought home with him. "And when his father died," finished Zhanil, "Arkanti became king and ruled wisely for many years, but he had no more adventures."

When the children politely applauded, he could see genuine appreciation for his effort, which would have pleased him even had the telling not exhausted him so. At the edge of his vision, he saw the man still loitering in the doorway. *What do you want? Either come in or go away*. "Now you must keep your bargain," he said weakly, "and tell me one of your stories."

Since the children could not agree on who would act as their storyteller, or even on which tale to tell, the result was chaos. Zhanil seized the opportunity to question them about Turya mythology. "Who is this Kanesh you keep telling about?" he asked. "Is he a king?"

The smaller children laughed, while the older ones tried to explain. "No," said a six-year-old boy, "he's the Storm God, the greatest of the gods."

"Is he greater than the Sun and the Moon?" Zhanil knew from his father that the dominant cult in Rhodeen at the time of the invasion had worshipped the celestial bodies. Clearly the old beliefs had changed, or perhaps had been erased altogether.

"Kanesh gives warriors their power," said an accented voice from the doorway, "and Azzi the Earth Mother gives life to them and the land. We recognize the Sun and Moon as her servants, helping her in her work."

Tall and fair-haired, the man who entered the room was young, with a penetrating gaze that made Zhanil uncomfortable. "I didn't know that. Sometimes in Ottabia we hear stories from Rhodeen, but—" Zhanil willed himself to be quiet before he started babbling and revealed too much.

Still holding his gaze, the man gestured to the children. "Menhit," he said to the oldest girl, "take the others into the kitchen and see what Orishte has for you. I wish to visit with ... Lakhun, is it?"

Zhanil lowered his eyes to his lap as Menhit ushered the other children out of the room. In the past two days he had interacted with three other Turya, as well as endured Uzhena's scrutiny, but none of them made him flush with embarrassment as this young man did. "Is something wrong?" he asked.

"You tell fine stories for a goatherd."

"Is that so strange?" replied Zhanil. "Most people in Khalgar can read and write a little, and telling stories on a rainy day is nothing unusual."

"You fight well, too," added the man. "Had you been struck by one of our arrows, from one of our bows, you would be dead now."

Sensing a challenge, Zhanil looked up at him. "I don't believe I got your name."

"I am Kalmeki, son of Harunta," answered the man. As he drew near, blue eyes searched Zhanil's face as if searching for something. His voice dropped, and he commented, "You speak the language of Rhodeen quite fluently. Are you certain you are from Khalgar?"

Zhanil drew a deep breath, wondering what made Kalmeki so suspicious. Surely storytelling was a pastime shared by all classes, as was the ability to fight when attacked. "I have family there," he said, "and family here in Rhodeen, and it isn't uncommon for people where I live to speak both languages."

While the former statement was true, the latter was tenuous enough to make Zhanil awkward. He did not understand why, but the fiction he had so carefully constructed seemed ready to collapse under Kalmeki's scrutiny. "Everyone's been very kind, but more than anything I'd like to be home again."

"When you can climb up and down the stairs without losing your breath," said Kalmeki, "then you will be allowed to leave."

"Am I a prisoner here, then?"

Kalmeki's brows furrowed, yet in his eyes Zhanil sensed he was more bemused than irritated "Even an honored guest knows when he should stay where he is, or when the weather is no good for traveling. You have been injured, and should be in bed, not tiring yourself telling stories to the children." The emphasis he placed on *bed* hinted at a pastime other than sleeping. *Did I hear him correctly, or am I just imagining things*? A hot flush burned Zhanil's cheek. *Gods, I must be. Turyar don't do such things. They don't even have prostitutes*. "I feel better today."

"But you are clearly tired," said Kalmeki, claiming the chair beside Zhanil. "Why did you ask the children about the Storm God?"

Eager to offset his embarrassment, Zhanil let his apprehension slide toward irritation. "Do you always interrogate your guests like this?" he asked. "I'd never heard of that god before. I know many stories from Rhodeen—I told you, I have family here—but none from the Turyar. When a person travels, it's always good to bring new stories home. Don't you do the same?"

"Of course," replied Kalmeki. Clearly, he seemed taken aback by the vigor of Zhanil's reply, and for a moment said nothing at all. Then he smiled. "So, what do you wish to know about our gods?"

Zhanil's mouth went dry at the way those blue eyes watched him, as though Kalmeki could read his every secret thought. His brain turned to wool, and his tongue followed suit. "Is, uh, Kanesh your chief god?" He felt like an absolute idiot.

As Kalmeki leaned forward, Zhanil caught the mingled odors of leather, wool, and male musk, alien yet not unpleasant. "A storm god is a fitting god for so wild a place. Spend a night in a yurt on the open grasslands and you will understand."Images of himself lying naked under a sheepskin

with Kalmeki flashed through Zhanil's mind. Blushing furiously, and certain the other man noticed, he quickly looked away.

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Chapter Four

Common sense told him it was too soon, with their partially healed injuries and the weather less than ideal for traveling, but Adeja could no longer contain his restlessness and knew that Zhanil felt the same.

Uzhena was stunned to hear talk of his leaving. "You foolish man," she said. "What are you thinking, taking the boy and yourself over the border when neither one of you is fit to travel?"

"We can't stay here any longer."

"The gods gave you a tongue to complain when they should have given you more sense," she replied. "You will not go until I say."

More than anything, Adeja wanted to be free of her and the impossible charade he was forced to maintain; he wanted to bellow in her ear that he was no common halfwit to be bullied by her, but the chief bodyguard to the Crown Prince of Rhodeen. He wanted to take her by the arms, shake her until her teeth rattled, and roar that yes, he *was* a Tajhaani soldier, and he fully expected her to shut her mouth and behave like a proper woman around him. For no matter what kindness they showed, his old memories of the Turyar refused to die, and he did not trust any of them not to hack him to pieces while he slept.

Above all, Adeja did not trust the young Turya warrior whose interest in Zhanil seemed as much personal as professional. Kalmeki was intelligent enough to suspect

something, and the more time Zhanil spent downstairs visiting with him and the other members of the boarding house, the more opportunity the Turya had to observe him and unravel his secret.

Adeja knew those tactics, even the lingering looks Kalmeki gave the prince. Given his limited interaction with the Turyar, he knew nothing about their sexual proclivities, but there could be no mistaking what was happening or how much danger it represented. Kalmeki was handsome, charismatic, and if he was trying to seduce Zhanil by playing upon his natural interest in the Turyar, he might very well succeed.

Whether by accident or some design on the part of their hosts, Adeja had little time alone with Zhanil, and even there he had to guard his comments. "We need to be home by midwinter," he said. "Your family will miss you, Lakhun, and you know your father won't like it if you become too lazy."

Zhanil quickly glanced at the door. No one was there. "We can't go in bad weather, Rajeev. You know that."

"The weather is better now than it will be," replied Adeja. "Your fever is gone, you're feeling stronger, and I can get about without much difficulty. We should go."

Getting Zhanil to agree with him took more effort than it should have, yet persuading their hosts to cooperate made talking to the prince seem easy by comparison. Neither Uzhena nor the elderly landlords would consider the matter, and even the town's mayor came by the house to protest, until Adeja's suspicion that he and Zhanil had become more prisoners than guests took firm root. "We must go," he argued. "So much inactivity and attention aren't good for us, especially the boy. His father won't approve of him being so spoiled, with him not having to work and all these gifts people keep bringing."

Later, Zhanil chided him for using that excuse. "You were the one who told me to accept those presents. You said we would offend people if we didn't."

"That was before other things started happening," said Adeja. "You're now a lazy, pampered boy who needs to get back to his father's farm, so don't be surprised if Nahar boxes your ears and tells you to get off your ass and go help in the kitchen or elsewhere."

Just to let Zhanil know he meant what he said, Adeja ordered his lieutenant to act the part of the aggravated uncle. Between him and Nahar, the charade lacked all subtlety, and its message was not lost on their hosts. After much discussion, it was agreed that they might leave within the week, provided their good health continued and the weather permitted travel. Provisions would be sent with them, as would an escort of three men.

Adeja grumbled and skirted the edges of their suspicions with his objections, but could not persuade his hosts to change their minds. All he could do was allay their confusion when he indicated that he and his companions wanted to stop at the sanctuary of Abh before continuing onto their home. "We should make an offering of thanks for our health," he said, then added, "Abh is the god of healing."

To his surprise, Uzhena nodded. "He is a god in this land also."

"I didn't think the Turyar worshipped him."

"His priests do good work and know many useful arts," she said.

Knowing that Sephil would be quite interested in this information, Adeja pressed for more. "When I was last here, the people worshipped the Sun and Moon as their chief gods. Do they still do that?"

"Here in the country, yes," she replied, "but not so much in the cities. Now do not ask me to explain what I do not know, as I have never been to those places. I only know that those gods and their holy places belonged to the old rulers. Their priests have been driven out, as the old line has been, so you will not find anything of them here. The people may worship as they please, of course, but no god is allowed to stand above the Storm God or Earth Mother."

Reading the subtle threat in her answer, Adeja refrained from asking anymore questions. What Uzhena had told him proved valuable enough, and once they were safely back in Khalgar, he would pass the information onto Sephil. Zhanil, too, might be interested, if he had not already heard it from another source.

His purpose accomplished, and grateful to at last be leaving Rhodeen, Adeja rested easier than he had done in several days. On the morning of their departure, dressed in the warm clothes their hosts pressed upon him, he enjoyed a hot breakfast in the communal dining room with Zhanil, Nahar and the other residents before limping down the front steps to the street where their horses stood tethered with the Turya warriors who would accompany them.

Kalmeki, dressed for riding with his composite bow slung across his back, strode up to him. "Good morning," he said. Adeja stared at him in horror. "What are *you* doing here?" "I will be taking you across the border." Kalmeki offered a broad grin, yet his intense gaze suggested knowledge of their charade, or worse, some sinister purpose. "Should the weather remain like this, you will arrive safely at your sanctuary in six days. That will suit you, yes?"

"Yes," Adeja replied weakly. "That will be fine."

* * * *

Zhanil knew merely from the silent, brooding manner in which Adeja hunched in the saddle that his mentor did not like having Kalmeki present. For his own part, he did not know whether to accept Kalmeki's explanation that the escort was a courtesy, or to read some threat in his presence.

"Can the town spare so many of you?" he asked, nodding toward Kalmeki's two companions. "There might be more raids."

"It is not likely in winter. The men you came upon would have been the last until spring."

"We don't really need an escort. The border isn't dangerous country at all," said Zhanil. "On our way here, we met no one."

The stare with which Kalmeki answered him was so steely cold that Zhanil stopped protesting. "It is our duty to make certain you return safely to your lands," was all he would say. Gone was the friendliness of their first encounter, and now Zhanil could only pray that the rigid notions of honor and duty the Turyar observed prevented them from slaughtering their guests in the wilderness.

Two other men rode with them, one a middle-aged warrior named Pethanya, and the other a healer who was the son of Hattu and Uzhena. For the journey, the Rhodeen landlady had bundled her three charges in woolen cloaks heavier than those they already wore, explaining that the weave would shed all but the most persistent downpour. The Turyar brought a tent of specially treated hide, ale, and cakes of dried meat mixed with berries.

"Our people eat this on long marches," explained Pethanya. "It will fill and nourish you better than anything else can."

Light rain and mist dogged their path into the hills, and in short time Zhanil found himself craving the warm bed and hearth of the boarding house. His right arm, immobilized in a sling to minimize any further trauma to his injury, liked neither the cold nor the constant motion of his being in the saddle, and he began to wonder how he could possibly endure the full six days, some of which would be spent navigating some very steep slopes.

We can't afford to stay any longer, he reminded himself. *It's either this or risk being discovered*.

Glancing at Kalmeki's broad back, he wondered if it was already too late.

Pethanya and the healer Hantili sometimes spoke to him, breaking the oppressive air with their banter, but Kalmeki said nothing, and Zhanil could not even look at him. He hated the thought that the other man considered him a liar, or

worse, an enemy. On any other occasion, he would have confronted Kalmeki outright and demanded to know what was wrong, but here in the wilderness, with no chance of survival should the Turyar turn openly hostile, he dared not do or say anything.

At midday, they stopped and sheltered in the lee of a hill. Zhanil sampled one of the dried Turya cakes while Hantili inspected his dressings through the many layers of clothing he wore. "What do you call this?" he asked. The concentrated mix of berries, venison, and fat tasted far better than it looked.

"That is pemmican," said Hantili. "It is eaten on long journeys or during the cold months when food is scarce." Gently tugging Zhanil's collar back in place, he grunted. "If you are not in any discomfort, we will change your dressing tomorrow. Now I will go see about your friend."

A few more hours of riding brought them to a broad valley watered by a rocky spring. Nahar led the horses to drink, while the Turyar made camp. Zhanil stood to one side with Adeja and watched the three men assemble and lash together a lightweight frame from dowels they carried in their baggage. Earlier, the Turyar had referred to a tent in which they would all sleep, but Zhanil quickly saw that this structure, which they called a yurt, was more than the narrow construction he had been expecting.

Over the frame, the men unrolled a hide covering which they claimed would shed the rain, yet when pressed, they refused to divulge the secret of the technique they used to treat the hide.

"No one knows how they do things," Adeja once said. "It's been two hundred years and more since they first appeared, and still no one knows exactly how they make their bows, or how they can travel so far and strike so quickly."

Because the Turyar lacked dry wood to make a fire, Pethanya provided an acrid but effective alternative from a sack of dried dung brought along for the purpose. As night fell, the six men gathered inside, shared another meal of pemmican and ale, and talked in hushed voices.

"Even in such empty places, one dares not speak too loudly," explained Kalmeki. "While we laugh, an enemy might come on swift and silent feet into our camp and take us unsuspecting."

Zhanil could not decide whether he referred to hostility in his own land, or if he truly believed a threat might be lurking in the hills of Ottabia. "These parts are uninhabited. Only travelers come through here, and not at this time of year."

Kalmeki stared hard at him from across the fire. "And yet, here you are," he said, his voice dangerously quiet. "They say such things about the Turya-lands. It is a sea of grass, to be sure, and desolate as far as the eye might see, but who knows what ill lurks beneath that seeming calm?"

With the harsh note on which this explanation ended, the warning was not lost on Zhanil, or on Adeja, who shifted nervously beside him. "We're not in the Turya-lands, Kalmeki, and hardly anyone comes through Ottabia in the winter. Surely you know some more cheerful stories than the ones you've been telling?"

Kalmeki's usual calm was replaced by surprise. "Telling stories is not something I do well," he finally answered. "If one of my companions wishes to share, you may ask him, but we will expect payment in kind."

From the one story Kalmeki had told about the Storm God, Zhanil knew he could weave a tale to enthrall a listener. However, he let the lie stand, and listened with interest as Hantili began to tell a story about a hero called Alagos. In a master storyteller's hands, the tale might have rivaled anything Zhanil heard at court, or from Adeja, who excelled at spinning yarns, but Hantili clearly had no gift, and afterward Zhanil was hard pressed to remember the story or its characters.

The next night, Nahar offered a story about an old man cuckolded by his bawdy young wife. Unlike Adeja, who held back for fear of revealing more than he already had, Nahar had nothing to hide, and so freely gave life to his tale, embellishing it with voices and pantomime that had the Turyar smiling, though afterward they expressed mild disapproval over the ending.

"Such a woman would be dragged to death behind her husband's horse," commented Pethanya. "Men must be different in Khalgar, to be willing to dishonor a married woman so, or tolerate one who shamed them."

Nahar shook his head. "You're missing the point, my friend."

"Then it is a good thing I do not live in Khalgar."

"It's only a story," said Zhanil. The debate, however, continued as a lively exchange between Nahar, Pethanya, and Hantili. Adeja and Kalmeki, occasionally staring at each other from opposite sides of the fire, remained aloof, while Zhanil burrowed under his blanket and fell asleep.

Hantili had changed his dressing that evening, and gave him a restorative tea, but the vitality he had felt upon starting the journey had begun to ebb. All he wished to do now was remain tucked in his sleeping roll in the cozy yurt for three days, or a week, or until spring; it no longer mattered to him when all he wanted was to rest.

What he had observed on the journey out held more truth than ever: the hills of Ottabia went on interminably. There was not neither a settlement nor a landmark he remembered, only a few scattered springs and trees, none of them distinctive enough to stand out in his memory. Time defied count. Three days might have passed, or four. Zhanil grasped the answer, lost it, found it again, and finally gave up trying.

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Adeja tugged off his right glove with his teeth and felt Zhanil's forehead. "He's not feverish."

Hantili reined in alongside him. "No, I would not expect it," he said. "His wound is healing cleanly. My mother gave him herbs to strengthen his blood, but she warned against his traveling so soon. He is tired and needs rest."

"We're two days from the sanctuary, if I've guessed correctly."

Impatient to know what the delay was, Kalmeki rode back to them. Without removing his gloves, he inspected the drooping Zhanil, turning his head this way and that until Zhanil mumbled a complaint, and shook his head. "He can continue. We will ride another hour or two, then make camp. Tomorrow we will quicken our pace, if those clouds allow it." Lifting his chin, he motioned to the storm lowering on the horizon, dark and threatening against an already gray sky.

Adeja gently nudged Zhanil. "Can you keep your head up for another hour?"

"I think so," he mumbled.

"That doesn't encourage me," replied Adeja. "It won't be good for your wound if you fall out of the saddle. Nahar, can you climb up behind him? I'll lead your horse."

That evening, as the wind picked up outside the yurt, Hantili once again changed Zhanil's dressing and gave him a thorough examination, probing for signs of discomfort before administering crushed pennyroyal brewed into a strong tea. "Sleep tonight," he said, "and tomorrow we will see."

Rain fell hard the next day, impeding their pace, and by nightfall Adeja doubted they would reach the sanctuary of Abh before the following sundown. Nahar continued to ride behind Zhanil to offer support, although Zhanil insisted he felt a little stronger; it was a wise move, for by evening exhaustion once again claimed him, and Hantili had to press food upon him before allowing him to burrow in his blankets and sleep.

Adeja spent the next day scanning the horizon for familiar landmarks. At last, as the afternoon faded into an early dusk, he spied a dark mass of buildings on the next hill. Olive trees and gnarled live oaks abutted the walls, and lights beamed from narrow windows—a welcome sight to any weary traveler. By the time the party reached the sanctuary, however, the gates were closed for the night.

Beside the stout wooden gate, Adeja found the bell. He gave it several hard jerks, calling out when his efforts produced no result. "Obiru, you lazy old dog!" he shouted in Khalgari. "I haven't all day to sit here and wait for you to scratch your belly!"

Moments later, a slat opened high up in the gate and a lantern appeared. "Is that you, Adeja?"

Adeja sighed heavily. He had not thought to warn Obiru against using his real name, nor would the man have remembered, he was so dull-witted. *Better to get into the sanctuary where it's warm and dry*, he decided, *and deal with the slip later*. "Have you seen any other Tajhaani travelers come this way? It's wet, cold, and I've been sitting on this horse so long I can no longer feel my ass. Now open the gate."

Obiru shifted the lantern. "Who's that with you?"

"You know Nahar and the boy. The other men are friends." "They look like foreigners."

"Open the fucking gate or at first light I'm going to shove a spear up your ass."

Beside and behind him, the Turyar, who did not understand Khalgari, shifted uncomfortably at what they knew was a rude exchange, and Adeja sensed rather than saw Kalmeki glare at him.

When the gate opened and Obiru saw the rough, fairhaired men who accompanied Adeja, the lantern quivered in his hand. He stammered, "Those are Turyar, aren't they?" "Yes, they are," grumbled Adeja, "and no, they aren't going to kill you unless you do something very stupid."

In the courtyard, lit only by Obiru's lantern, they were met by Amset and a groom, who gaped at the Turyar until Adeja barked at him to hold his reins while he dismounted. With difficulty, wincing at the stiffness and pain in his leg, he lowered himself to the ground, where he hobbled onto the cane Uzhena had given him. "Is Bedren about?" he asked Amset.

"He's having supper with the other priests, but I'll tell him you've arrived." Amset looked up at Zhanil, still in the saddle with Nahar. "Has he been injured again?"

Adeja shook his head. "He's just exhausted. A few days of rest and he'll be fine."

While the groom, now joined by two others, took custody of the horses and helped Nahar and Zhanil out of the saddle, Amset went inside. When he returned, the high priest was not with him, but Bedren sent along instructions that sick or injured guests should be taken to the infirmary, and all others to the usual lodgings. Amset and Obiru escorted the Turyar down a path to a building where they could wash, eat and rest, while Adeja limped along after Nahar, who managed to rouse Zhanil long enough to get him to walk on his own into the main complex.

Bedren came later, as the healer finished inspecting Adeja's wound. Rather than announce himself, the elderly high priest quietly appeared beside the bed, studied the ugly pink scar that had begun to form under the bandages, and expressed his disapproval with a delicate cough. "Even now, you cannot seem to stay out of trouble."

All Adeja could do was smile up at him. "I missed you, too."

"I did not care for Amset's report." Bedren turned his gaze toward the bed where Zhanil now slept. "If the prince has been seriously injured, and if you have compounded that injury by traveling prematurely, then—"

"The trip exhausted him," replied Adeja. "We felt it best to leave early, and the only reason the Turyar allowed it was because he looked well enough to go."

"He has no fever," added the healer, "and his wound is closing nicely." Dipping his fingers into a pot of ointment, he traced a moist line along Adeja's scar.

Adeja twitched and nearly swatted the man in annoyance. "Darinthes, you shitwit! You could at least warm the stuff before you attack me with it."

"Hold still," said Darinthes. "You're as uncooperative a patient now as you were twenty years ago. If all soldiers are the same, I'm glad I didn't become an army medic."

Bedren cleared his throat to demand their attention. "We are not accustomed to having Turyar under our roof. Do they know that this is a house of religion, and that we expect certain behavior from them?"

"They're not complete savages," answered Adeja, "and they say they worship Abh in Rhodeen. Amset is looking after them." As long as they surrendered their weapons at the gate and gave no trouble, Adeja could not care less what the Turyar did. "They'll probably leave tomorrow."

"Then I will leave you at that," said Bedren, "for now. In the morning, you will need to send your man to Prince Olmor to reassure him that his great-nephew has returned and is in good health."

Half an hour later, with his leg bandaged and his belly full of hot food, Adeja conferred with Amset; the lieutenant reported that the priests, wary of their Turya visitors and unable to communicate with them in Khalgari, were doing their best to avoid hostilities. "I translated until someone thought to bring in one of the priests from Rhodeen. Now that they can speak to each other, everything is fine. The Turyar are very polite guests, and you should see the priests falling over themselves trying to welcome them."

"Going out of their way to avoid an arrow in the gut, is more like it," commented Adeja. No matter what anyone said, he knew enough about the Turyar to know he would not rest easy until they were gone.

What occurred next confirmed his misgivings once and for all. Darinthes arranged for him to enjoy a hot sponge bath, his first since leaving Rhodeen. As Adeja stripped down to his loincloth and prepared to hobble into the knee-high tub, Kalmeki appeared in the doorway.

"I knew from the moment I saw you," he said quietly, "that you were not what you claimed to be."

Adeja ignored him and stepped into the hot water. After six days in the wilderness, the bath was a luxury more welcome than silk or fine wine. The hearth burned steadily at his back, banishing the chill lingering elsewhere in the chamber. Kalmeki waited, then after a few moments continued, "In Meduin, you told us that the boy's name was Lakhun."

"Either you're coming in or going out," barked Adeja. "Just close that fucking door."

Closing the door behind him, Kalmeki took a seat within arm's distance of the tub. "Now you will do me the courtesy of answering."

Adeja reached for the soap and pumice, and began to scrub his arms. "The boy's name is Lakhun. What of it?"

Again, there was silence. Adeja sluiced the soap and dead skin from his left arm, then glanced up to find Kalmeki staring intently at him with those obscenely blue eyes. "What do you want from me?"

A sidelong gaze indicated the bed where Zhanil slept. "You know very well that you are lying. Hattu has already told me that when the boy fell, you called to him by another name."

"If you don't believe me, then why didn't you torture me when you had the chance? Or better yet, why don't you ask *him* what his name is?"

Kalmeki set his jaw, but did not take up the challenge. "Should I call you Rajeev, or Adeja?"

"Both are perfectly good Tajhaani names. Pick one."

Perhaps the Turyar did not understand sarcasm, or were too stubborn to accept it as an answer. Kalmeki narrowed his eyes. "Since you are now safe inside Khalgar's borders and we have given up our weapons, you have nothing to gain by hiding the truth."

"Who says I'm lying?" asked Adeja.

"Because every word you speak and everything you do tells me that you are lying," said Kalmeki, "and when the tattoo on your arm is the royal Sun of Rhodeen, I have even more reason to doubt your honesty."

Adeja froze. His tattoo, acquired at a time when he never thought to see Sephil again, had been with him for so long that he had all but forgotten about it. "So it is," he finally replied, "but it's just a tattoo. People here worship the Sun and Moon just as they do in Rhodeen."

"You do not seem to be a very religious man," said Kalmeki. "I certainly do not recall your praying to any god or goddess while you were in Rhodeen. But let us assume for a moment that you *are* telling the truth. If the people of Khalgar worship the Sun and Moon as you say, do their goatherds also give their sons royal names?"

"Lakhun isn't a royal name," said Adeja.

"No, but you and I both know that the boy sleeping over there is neither a goatherd's son nor is he called Lakhun. Hattu heard you call him Zhanil, and even *I* know that is a royal name."

A physical confrontation Adeja could have handled, even hobbled as he was. This parrying of words, this tangle of wits in which Kalmeki was trying to ensnare him, was something else entirely. Adeja concentrated on the hot water pooling around his legs and the pumice in his hand, and prayed Kalmeki would read his silence as an invitation to leave.

Kalmeki folded his arms over his chest, patiently waiting for a response that did not come. "Keep your secrets, if it pleases you," he said at last. "I will not trouble the boy to ask him, for had he trusted me, he would have already told me the truth."

He rose and walked to the door. Just as he started to turn the latch, he spared a final glance at both bed and hearth. "I think we will meet again, Adeja," he said. "And when we do, you would do well to remember that those who speak the truth and shun the lie can still recognize deceit in others."

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Chapter Five

Zhanil put down his stylus, let his head sink into his hands, and sighed. Tallying measures of barley, wool, and pressed olives, and figuring the percentage owed the Crown was proving an exquisitely effective punishment, even though Olmor was careful never to refer to it as such.

"You told your family you intended to learn how to run an estate while you were here," said Olmor. "Surely you did not mean to lie to them, did you?"

All Zhanil could do was hold his tongue and thank the gods that his great-uncle did not write to his father and grandfather in Bhellin with the entire story, or what fragments of it Olmor had been able to glean from his jumbled account. He told Olmor only what was necessary, leaving out many details.

It could be much worse. His punishment could have included labor in the kitchen, or reading aloud to his greatuncle from one of the many dull theological texts Olmor preferred. It might be days before I finish these tallies.

Sadly, Zhanil's fondness for keeping lists did not encompass a talent with figures, and at such moments, with the gray, wet weather already darkening his mood, he sorely missed Arjuna.

"I have no news of him," said Adeja in a tone that suggested he had not made much effort to obtain the information.

"Have you even written to him?" asked Zhanil.

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"None of the recruits are allowed to receive mail." Adeja rearranged the lap rug over his legs and gazed into the fire. "By now, he's probably finished with his initial training. I'm sure he's been given time to visit his mother."

Looking out the window again, Zhanil could not see much through the damp mist clinging to the estate grounds. By the time he had awakened in the sanctuary's infirmary, the Turyar had already left. Never saying as much to Adeja or anyone else, he regretted not having been able to part on amicable terms with Kalmeki, or at least say goodbye. Whether he would have divulged the truth, he could not say, and in retrospect judged it was probably best that the opportunity had been denied him.

Adeja expressed no regrets. "If I never see another Turya again, I'll die a happy man. They can smile and put on a hospitable face, but you can't trust them."

"You just don't like them," said Zhanil.

"You say that so lightly," replied Adeja, "as if I just told you that apples gave me indigestion. You'd feel the same way about the Turyar if you'd seen what horrors they inflict on their enemies."

Zhanil thoughtfully chewed the end of his stylus, an unbecoming habit from which his tutors had all unsuccessfully tried to break him. "And how do the Tajhaani behave in war?"

"What does that have to do with the Turyar?"

"You go on about Turya atrocities, but I've read your histories, Adeja. I know how the Tajhaani spit their enemies on lances, or boil or flay them alive, and I know it's been done to innocent civilians as well as soldiers."

Firelight and shadow turned Adeja's scowl into a hideous thing. "You shouldn't presume to talk to me about things you know nothing about," he growled. "War does terrible things to all men."

"And beyond war?" asked Zhanil, realizing even as the words left his lips that pressing the issue was perhaps the wrong course to take. "Your kings kill all their male relatives when they ascend the throne. The Turyar might look different, but it seems to me that in every other way they're just like everybody else."

Throwing off the rug and seizing his cane as though he meant to bludgeon someone with it, Adeja fumbled to his feet. "I'm through having this discussion with you, boy."

As he stormed from the room, slamming the door behind him, Zhanil covered his face with his hands and cursed his own stupidity. *No matter what I say, or how I say it, he hates the Turyar so much that he can't see how pointless it is.*

Half a day of cold silence ended with Zhanil taking his meal alone in the study, for neither Amset nor Nahar ever left their post to dine with him, and Olmor had grown so accustomed to living alone on his estate that he preferred solitude. Zhanil retired upstairs as soon as his great-uncle's steward gave him permission, had his wound checked, and took a hot bath before going to bed. Gone were the heavy dressings and sling, in favor of a light linen bandage that absorbed the ointment the healer smeared over the scab to ease the itch. Nevertheless, Zhanil could not move his shoulder without some discomfort, meaning it would be a while before he could shoot a bow or use a sword as he had before.

The following afternoon, as Zhanil hopelessly tried to ignore his growing headache and finish his work, a short reprieve came in the form of a letter bearing his father's seal: a crescent moon stamped in blue wax.

Breaking the seal with a penknife, Zhanil rubbed the weariness from his eyes and held the letter to the candlelight. His father's neat hand covered no more than a page, but he skimmed the preliminary salutations and family business, intending to savor news of his mother and sister at a more leisurely time.

There, halfway down the page, was the material he sought. "'Your grandfather has informed us that you have been gravely injured during your travels. Though we hear you are much improved, we wish to know more about the circumstances in which your travail occurred. Of course, we understand that your shoulder pains you still, so we do not expect a written report at this time, but we will wish to speak privately with you on your return home.'"

Even had it not been couched in formal generalities that did not match the rest of the letter, Zhanil would have recognized his father's warning. Ampheres had spies in Olmor's household, and probably knew a great deal more about events than anyone realized. Zhanil knew now was the time to start rehearsing explanations, and to start wondering how his grandfather would chastise him on his return.

That evening, Zhanil dutifully wrote back to his parents, assuring them of his good health and present boredom, while asking for news of his relatives and his friend.

I am sure Arjuna is quite well, but his father is restless for word, and as this cold weather does not agree with Adeja, good tidings would give him ease. Give our love also to Lahis, and assure her that we will return in the spring.

Whatever news his father could send, Zhanil intended to pass along to Adeja as a peace offering, for when his mentor chewed on an insult, a long time might pass before he forgave.

* * * *

"When, dear husband, did you plan on sharing this information with me?"

Sephil steadied himself, then met his wife's angry gaze. They sat in her solar, where she often spent her mornings with her ladies; before sitting down, Sephil had banished the women from the room, for what he and Ketalya had to discuss was not gossip for their ears. "If you want the truth," he replied, "I did not intend to tell you at all, but since your father has already mentioned it, I see I have no choice."

Ketalya tightened her mouth into a thin line. "As Zhanil's mother, I have the right to know before anyone."

Nodding, he conceded to her on that point. "Yes, but I did not tell you because Zhanil did not want you to know, and for no other reason than that. It was his decision. I did not like it, but since he is an adult, I had no choice but to respect it."

"Respect?" she sputtered. "He deserves to be taken over someone's knee and thrashed, and you are talking to me about *respect*?"

"Considering what has just happened, you are right," admitted Sephil, "and I am sure his grandfather will see to it. In fact, I would not be surprised if your father did the deed himself."

Ketalya delicately rubbed at her temples with two fingers and sighed. "Whatever possessed the boy to do such a foolish thing? No, never mind that. Why is it that we always argue when it comes to Zhanil?"

"Because Ellina is still too young to be a dynastic pawn," he replied.

"You should have stopped him, Sephil, or at the very least told me what he intended to do. Instead, you sit there like an—"

"Like an impotent fool?" he finished. Sephil managed a weak smile while folding his hands in his lap. "Once again, it seems I must beg your forgiveness for being so incompetent a father."

She rolled her eyes and looked toward the window, appearing to study the downpour drenching her private garden "Spare me your sarcasm. It does not suit you."

"What would you have had me do, Ketalya? Would you have had me chase Zhanil about his apartments with a leather belt, or lock him away for two or three years as my father did me? You know very well that that would not have stopped him. Like it or not, Zhanil is not a child anymore."

"If *you* were not willing to do anything," she said, "you should have gone to my father."

"If I thought he could get Zhanil to see reason, I might have, but it is just as likely that he would have taken Zhanil's curiosity for ambition and encouraged him," replied Sephil. "Gods know how hard I have tried to prevent that."

Without a servant to minister to her, Ketalya poured her own tea before offering to refill her husband's cup. "You condemn my father too readily."

Sephil blew on his tea to cool it as he sipped at it. "He has never made any secret of his dynastic ambitions. On your side, Zhanil is a junior prince of Khalgar, one among dozens, yet your father dotes on him almost as much as he does on Ettarin and his sons. We both know why."

"Father has said many times that he does not seek to invade Rhodeen. He may be eighty, but he has lost none of his wits, and he is not so foolish as to invite war with the Turyar," said Ketalya.

"What he says and what he thinks are two different things. With the heir to the throne in his bloodline, who knows what he would do, given the right opportunity? However, I doubt he will be pleased with Zhanil's actions, and I fully expect him to reprimand the boy. I will also chastise him, if it gives you any comfort."

"You had better leave the scolding to me, dear." Ketalya indicated the pastries on the tray between them. "Have a scone before you go. I doubt they feed you properly in the sanctuary."

Sephil did not intend to return straightaway to the sanctuary of Abh. If Ketalya was cross with him, then he was angry with Ampheres. Not for any specific word or deed, as the king had been quite circumspect under the scrutiny of a court that now included Turya ambassadors, but rather for the subtle encouragements that had allowed Zhanil to contemplate such a foolhardy course of action.

Too wise to set the information down in writing, Olmor had not indicated the full extent of Zhanil's injuries, yet the king's spies reported what he would not, and Sephil now knew that his son had returned to Ottabia after an absence of several weeks with his arm in a sling, his shoulder having been punctured by an arrow. The spies also reported that Zhanil's chief bodyguard, referred to only as 'the foreigner,' had suffered a deep gash in the thigh that would leave him with a permanent limp.

What circumstances produced their injuries still remained unclear, and what little was known proved confusing. Zhanil's first stop on his way back from Rhodeen had not been his great-uncle's estate but the nearby sanctuary of Abh, and he had come with a Turya escort whose stated purpose had been to see him safely across the border. Whether the guard had been provided as a courtesy to injured guests, or a means of banishing unwelcome visitors, no one could say.

On most days, even Crown Prince Ettarin had to wait for an audience, but this afternoon the vizier who acted as the king's secretary came out straightaway and, with an unctuous little bow, indicated that Sephil should follow. The unexpected haste with which he was admitted was enough to make Sephil pause before entering the royal salon.

His father-in-law sat behind his marble writing desk, reviewing correspondence as he always did at this time of day. Ampheres did not stand or speak as Sephil approached, but simply observed with eyes that missed nothing and an impenetrable calm that Sephil found infuriating.

"Sit down, son."

"No, I prefer to stand," said Sephil coldly. "This will not take long."

Ampheres narrowed his eyes, so faintly that the gesture almost went unnoticed. "It was not a request. I do not suffer to let others stand in my presence when I must look up at them."

"You know what has happened in Ottabia." Sephil found a chair, and made it clear by his hesitation that complying was the last thing he wished to do.

"Yes, I know that Zhanil crossed the border, crossed paths with the Turyar, and was injured." Ampheres leaned forward, adding, "And you also knew of it, did you not?"

Once, Sephil would have admitted his fault and accepted the blame, whether or not it was his alone. Now he brushed aside the question. "I counseled him not to go, but I could not prevent him. Still, I know where he got the idea, even if you did not encourage him outright."

For once, Ampheres looked genuinely surprised. "I did no such thing, Sephil. His venture was the utmost foolishness."

Sephil felt his heart beat hard in his chest. His stomach turned, threatening nausea. "You have put it into his head that he might one day rule Rhodeen, when you and I both know there is only a dim, *dim* chance of that ever happening," he said, hearing the quaver in his voice and praying that Ampheres did not hear it as well.

"If Tajhaan makes a move, you will mobilize your forces to stop them before they can become a threat, but you and I both know that you are not going to risk war on two fronts by challenging the Turyar. Zhanil will never sit on the throne, and you know it."

"That is a pretty speech," said Ampheres, "but let me remind you that I never made any such promises to Zhanil. If I said anything to him, it was nothing that was not already true."

You know what a child does with a maybe. Right away he turns it into a yes. "I only know what I have observed," replied Sephil, "and what I see does not encourage me. I should have said something long ago, but I was too complacent, too afraid that I was mistaken. I did not want to offend you. Now I see that I should have listened to my instincts."

Ampheres remained impassive. "While your paternal devotion is admirable, your instincts have misguided you. The Turyar are now firmly entrenched in Rhodeen. Zhanil—"

"You say that now," answered Sephil, "but we all know that you never rule out a possibility, no matter how slight it may be. Zhanil would not have gone to Rhodeen if he did not believe you had ambitions in that direction. Say what you wish about what you might or might not have told him, but as his father I am telling you that you have already said too much."

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Part Two

Little Star

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Chapter Six

When Dashir paced the colonnade overlooking the fountain court, he wanted no interruptions. And as he had taken to pacing more and more frequently, and shouted at the last man who irritated him thus, the servants no longer troubled him with their queries.

Below, his wives and daughters sat on cushions near the fountain curb, gossiping and busy at the intricate needlework of which they seemed so fond. Occasionally one of the girls glanced up and caught her father's eye, but their mothers had long since stopped caring what their husband said or did.

Dashir ignored them as he shut out the murmurings of the servants and the cooking smells coming from elsewhere in the house. If he focused on anything besides the mosaic floor under his feet, it was the patch of sky above the courtyard. A winter sky should never be so brilliantly blue, or the day so unseasonably warm. In Rhodeen, it would have been cold and rainy.

Once, Dashir had relished Tajhaan's warm weather and exotic surroundings, as it let him forget the chaos of those last terrible weeks in Rhodeen. After his flight, he was so relieved not to be branded a coward that he gladly accepted the High Prince's protection and the gift of a house near the palace in exchange for marrying the prince's eldest daughter. Yet now, twenty years later, with little else to do but reflect on the path his life had taken, he regretted his bargain with Armajid. Dashir had come to despise the desert and the customs that sprang from it. The lavish house felt more like a prison than a refuge, and even the Tajhaani language had grown hateful to his ears.

Like the exile he was, he craved the green lands and rivers of Rhodeen, and knew that he would probably never see them again. Armajid excelled at making promises, but they bore little fruit.

"Father, you will wear away the pattern if you continue pacing like that."

Dashir threw his elder son a venomous look. In response, the young man shrugged and smiled in a way that reminded Dashir of the boy's mother, who had long since ceased to stir her husband's desire. "What do you want, Ninarsha?"

"Grandfather wishes to see you."

"And are you now acting as his messenger?" snapped Dashir. "I thought he had servants to do that for him."

"It is a matter he does not trust to anyone else."

Dashir scowled at the smirk his son called a smile. Ninarsha did little to earn his father's affection, seeming to prefer the company of his mother and grandfather, as well as their endless intrigues. Had Dashir been permitted to oversee his upbringing, Ninarsha would have learned respect and discretion, yet even the boy's naming had been taken from him; the result was a petulant, spoiled prince who neither knew nor cared about the land he aspired to rule.

"And has your grandfather asked you to be present?"

"No," replied Ninarsha, in a tone that reflected his disappointment.

"Then be off with you," said Dashir.

On the threshold of the royal audience chamber, Dashir encountered a vizier who escorted him upstairs, past ranks of petitioners and supplicants to an inner chamber lit by brass oil lamps. Behind a mahogany writing desk, gaunt yet menacing like a spider hunched in some vast web, Armajid awaited him. "Sit down, my son," he said. Even his voice, raspy with age, hinted at something poisonous. "There has been news from Khalgar."

Dashir sat in the chair provided, but refused the drink offered him. "A messenger has arrived?"

Armajid smiled. "If you wish to call him that, yes," he said. "The information comes from a reliable source, or so we are told."

After so many years of playing this waiting game, Dashir knew not to let his impatience show. Armajid enjoyed an audience, and more still, he relished toying with that same audience. "Of course," said Dashir. "I cannot imagine the High Prince wasting his time with incompetent informants."

Another smile, this one more insincere than the last, crossed Armajid's lips. "No, indeed I would not. Tell me, how is young Ninarsha doing?"

You saw him yourself not an hour ago, you meddling old goat. "He is well enough. I believe he means to spend the afternoon riding his chariot." Or one of his whores, Dashir added silently. Since his grandfather had provided both, it made little difference.

"Ah, the impatience of youth," mused Armajid. "Ninarsha reminds me of myself at that age, so eager to assume the reins of power."

Had Dashir the nerve, he would have added that his son was also terribly ill-equipped to do so. Ninarsha made no secret of his ambition to claim Rhodeen's throne, while his grandfather made absolutely no effort to curb the boy's pride or teach him the rudiments of statecraft that would have prepared him to rule. Caught between them, Dashir could do little to control either.

Both of them conveniently forget that I am the designated Crown Prince, and that I come before Ninarsha in the succession. However, Dashir knew better than to utter that statement aloud, for with two pliable grandsons to mold to his will, Armajid had no further use for his son-in-law, and no qualms about ridding himself of troublesome family members. Dashir already knew from the court eunuchs how on the day of his accession, the High Prince had his brothers and halfbrothers, his nephews and male cousins strangled, filling the royal harem with the wailing of bereft mothers.

One misstep, one wrong word or gesture, and Dashir would face his own silken cord in the darkness, or worse, a case of fatal indigestion, and his family would neither mourn his loss nor speak of it. Trapped in webs within webs of intrigue whose roots he could not plumb, he could not fathom how the Tajhaani did not perish from gorging on their own poison.

"Ninarsha may have to wait," he said. "It is not my wish, of course, but obstacles still exist, and he may have sons of his own before his time comes."

"That time might not be so long in coming," answered Armajid. "My informant in Bhellin tells me that the young pretender behaves most foolishly. He may end up cutting his own throat, with no help from us."

No names were mentioned, nor were they necessary. These days, the epithet 'young pretender' referred to Prince Zhanil Sephides. "That would be most fortuitous, if it can be arranged," Dashir said cautiously. "However, since I lack your resources, I have no knowledge of what he has done."

"Perhaps one of the most foolish things he could possibly do in his position," replied Armajid. "He traveled to Rhodeen in secret, and there was seriously injured."

Dashir took the moment he needed to digest this news. "In these dangerous times, why would he do such a thing?"

"Ah, that is the question, is it not?" Armajid sipped at the strong liqueur that he credited with strengthening his blood and prolonging his life. "No one can say, although I am certain that Ampheres has demanded an explanation from him."

"You do not think it was Ampheres' own idea?"

Armajid frowned. "My son, you spend too much time pacing in the shadows, for clearly your mind is not as sharp as it ought to be. If Ampheres wishes to spy on the Turyar, and I have no doubt that he does, he would not be so colossally stupid as to have his own precious grandson go on reconnaissance in Rhodeen. Instead, he is most displeased, and has banished the boy from court for an indefinite period. Sooner or later, the Turyar will hear of it, if they do not know already. This may provide us with an advantage."

Over the years, Dashir had learned to ignore his father-inlaw's jibes, as the man dealt with most of his offspring in this

disparaging manner. Instead, he quietly pondered the nature of this young prince whom he had never seen. Zhanil would be a few months younger than Ninarsha, only eighteen, yet under his grandfather's tutelage he seemed to cherish the same dynastic ambitions, enough that he was willing to dare what even his cousin did not.

Reliable, well-placed spies could have provided more information, but Armajid's ill-advised attempt on the boy's life thirteen years ago had resulted in the expulsion of Tajhaan's ambassadors from Khalgar, and the prince's own specially trained bodyguards, headed, it was said, by a former Tajhaani soldier, made gaining access to him even more difficult.

"Yes, you are surely right," Dashir finally said. "He will do something even more foolish, and we will be rid of him."

"And if he does not," added Armajid, "we will take pains to ensure it. His death will provide a perfect opportunity to repair our relations with Khalgar."

How Armajid planned to endear himself to Ampheres by eliminating the man's grandson, Dashir failed to grasp. To avoid further insult, he kept his doubts hidden behind gestures of agreement. "This whole affair has been most unfortunate. Any plan to restore good relations with Khalgar would be applauded by the court and, I am certain, by many within Khalgar as well."

Armajid, narrowing his eyes, gave him a curious look. "You will have your part to play," he said, "so your sentiments had better be more than idle talk. The prince has a sister, still somewhat too young for marriage, but such plans take time to bear fruit, so by the time we are ready she will be old enough. The royal house of Rhodeen may be reconciled through your son and this Khalgari princess, and, provided the old man is still alive by then, Ampheres will see the sense in joining his forces with ours."

Nodding, Dashir accepted the wine a servant offered him and lifted his cup before drinking. The sweet, dry vintage, however, could not cleanse the bitterness from his palate. "Have you spoken of this to Ninarsha?"

"As long as the girl is pretty and obedient, he will not complain," said Armajid, "and if he does balk, we will remind him that we command his obedience as well."

By the time Dashir returned to his apartments and plunged his hands into the basin of cold water his servants poured for him, he was trembling. He bathed his face and rinsed his mouth, trying to scour away a filth that went deeper than flesh. When he was finished, he waved away the attendant who entered with his supper and walked out onto the colonnade.

In his absence, the day had ended and twilight had fallen on the city. Below, the fountain court stood empty, the women having retired indoors. Alone with his thoughts, Dashir began to pace in the darkness, once again mulling over the bitter bargain he had made.

You ran for your life, while your brothers and uncle and cousins perished, while you left your mother and sister to mercy of the Turyar. If the gods punish you now, it is no less than you deserve.

Dashir paused, placed his hands on the stone railing, and wondered, though not for the first time, if he would have been happier had he met his fate in Rhodeen.

* * * *

Zhanil clenched his teeth, but did not flinch when his grandfather slapped him hard across the face. Even before the king summoned him, he had expected a reprimand, though not quite as direct as the one he received.

"I do not suffer fools in my house," barked Ampheres, "and here you are the greatest one of all."

Smarting as much from humiliation from as the blow, Zhanil said nothing; he knew better than to try to offer an explanation, excuse, or even open his mouth when his grandfather was angry. Instead, he concentrated very hard on the rug at his feet—*dark blue squares, surrounded by smaller red ones, interlocking*—

"Well, boy, I assume you have something to say for yourself."

Still staring at the floor, Zhanil swallowed hard and answered, "What would you like me to say, sir?"

"I would *like* you to tell me that you are not an absolute idiot, but I will not have a liar for a grandson," replied Ampheres. "Rather, you will explain exactly what you thought you were doing crossing the border."

"I wanted to see Rhodeen."

The simplicity of this answer momentarily silenced the king. "For what purpose would you need to see Rhodeen? Have you become tired of living?"

When Zhanil lifted his eyes, he saw his grandfather standing before him, his arms folded across his chest. He measured his words, making certain to use the formal diction the king expected of him. "No, sir, I have not. I merely wanted to see with my own eyes how the people lived there."

"And why would you need to do such a thing?"

"I think you know, sir," Zhanil said cautiously.

For several heartbeats, the longest silence he had ever known, he feared he had misjudged. His grandfather was terrible in his anger, and now he held his breath in anticipation of worse than the tongue-lashing and blow he had just received.

Ampheres drew a long, hissing breath. "So not only are you a fool, but an ambitious one at that."

"I was not speaking of ambition, sir, but curiosity. This has nothing to do with conquering Rhodeen. The people seem quite content under Turya rule."

Somehow, Zhanil sensed that this answer was not what his grandfather wished to hear. His father, having already spoken to the king about the matter, had done his best to explain the situation and prepare his son for the interview. Zhanil listened, hearing things he had known all his life, and some he never knew at all.

"When your grandfather offered me protection nineteen years ago, I had to accept certain conditions," Sephil told him earlier. "I knew that I was a dynastic pawn, and that any son I had would also be a pawn. I knew the king would groom you for power, and fill your head with ideas of conquering Rhodeen. I hated the thought, so I made certain you had at least one mentor who did not pay lip service to your grandfather."

Zhanil did not have to think to supply the name. "You hired Adeja."

"I hired him to protect your mother while she was pregnant with you, because I did not trust the guards your grandfather appointed," said Sephil. "Adeja may be brusque, and your mother has never learned to like him, but he knows how to think, and he is a natural survivor. When you were born, knowing what ambitions your grandfather had for you, I knew I wanted you to have those same skills.

"When you meet with your grandfather, do not try to confront him with these things, for he will deny it. You must understand that dynastic politics are a precarious game. Even he does not know how events will turn, so he will admit nothing before the fact. Call it deception if you like, but it is also prudence."

Sephil paused, then continued, "I realize you know much of what I am telling you, but I want you to listen anyway. On the one hand, the king must ensure his own realm's safety, so your grandfather maintains neutral relations with the Turyar and receives their ambassadors, but he has never forgotten that he has the legitimate heirs to the throne of Rhodeen in his keeping. If he has the opportunity to exploit this advantage, he will use it, whether you support him or no."

Zhanil knew he had gone a step too far in mentioning ambition, but his explanation could not suffice without it. The need to witness firsthand, either to justify an invasion or defeat it, had been his purpose, not the desire to conquer. Had circumstances played out as they ought, the king never would have known what he did.

"I hope you realize how fortunate you are to be alive," said Ampheres, "since your folly has just resulted in a serious diplomatic incident. Your punishment will make you reconsider such gross stupidity, if your wound has not already done so."

Reaching behind him, Ampheres drew a paper from his desk and read from it. "You are to be banished to the stronghold at Medás, there to serve as a common soldier until we see fit to let you return to us here in Bhellin; it may be six months, or six years, depending on how satisfied we are with your conduct. You will have no special privileges, and you will leave your servants and bodyguards behind."

Banishment was a possibility for which Zhanil had been prepared, though not to such an extent. "Yes, sir," he replied.

"Let us hope there is a glimmer of actual obedience behind your words, and that you are not simply telling me what I wish to hear." Ampheres folded the paper and shook it at him. "If you do anything so foolish while at Medás, such as crossing the river into Rhodeen, I will place you in irons, or better yet, cut your feet off at the ankles so you cannot go anywhere at all. Is that understood, boy?"

Zhanil nodded. "I understand, sir."

"I doubt very much that you do. Since half the court is already busy gossiping to the other half about your little misadventure, you can be sure that the Turyar are by now fully aware of your deception," said Ampheres. "If you grasp

anything, know that they do not appreciate games or subterfuge, and take offense at any attempt to toy with them in such a manner."

"Yes, sir," answered Zhanil. "More than once, they told me they did not like lies."

"Because they knew you *were* lying to them. They may appear rough and uncivilized, but they are not stupid." With the folded missive, Ampheres lightly tapped Zhanil's shoulder for emphasis. "If they spared you, it was because they hold the laws of hospitality sacred. That does *not*, however, mean you do not owe them an explanation for your behavior."

Zhanil wished his grandfather would not swat him like an errant child, but consoled himself with the thought that all of the king's offspring were subject to this treatment. "I would have explained everything to them," he replied, "if they had not left Ottabia in such a hurry."

"You may yet have the opportunity," said Ampheres, "but I am not about to turn you loose on their ambassadors while they are still so tetchy about the matter. Therefore, *I* will have make your excuses for you, and let us hope for your sake that *turkan* Arzhati understands that I did not authorize your little excursion and does not decide to take further action. The last thing I want is a Turya army sitting across the border waiting for a pretext to invade."

Much chastened, Zhanil left the royal salon. Not yet ready to return to his apartments or see his parents, he paced up and down one of the galleries, observed by Nahar and the passing servants, whose curious glances he ignored. You never meant any harm, he told himself. You only wanted to see Rhodeen and its people, nothing more. Now his grandfather was talking in frightening terms, citing diplomatic incidents, angry ambassadors and an agitated army ready to invade Khalgar.

Leaning against the wall, he put his head in his hands and pulled his fingers through his hair. You knew there would be consequences, whether you intended to be discovered or not. Now you've gone and made a mess of it for everybody. How could you be so colossally stupid, so utterly naïve? Exile suddenly seemed the least of his concerns.

Nahar walked over to him. "Are you all right?"

"I don't know yet."

His mother disapproved of his banishment to the military as much as she had disliked the thought of his spending the winter in Ottabia without her, yet as it was the king's decision, she curbed her protests. "You deserve *some* punishment," she said, "though I would have kept you closer to home."

"No doubt in a dungeon without any hope of parole until I am forty," he finished.

Ketalya arched an eyebrow at him. "It would teach you to think before acting. Now be a dear and hand me that skein of yellow silk." Her ladies had vacated the room upon his arrival, leaving parents and son to talk privately. Ellina, who still did not entirely understand what her brother had done and knew nothing at all about his punishment, had gone with them.

Zhanil passed the embroidery silk across to her. "Medás will be prison enough," he said. "And who knows, you may

get your wish. Grandfather might leave me there for ten or fifteen years, since he does not seem to know what else to do with me."

"If it must be done," Sephil said quietly, "then I do not think you are in any danger. The experience might serve you well."

"Sending you to Medás is a curious choice," said Ketalya. "You will be within sight of Rhodeen."

Zhanil grinned. "Perhaps the temptation is part of my punishment." His mother, however, did not always respond to his attempts at humor, and this time provided no exception. "Do not worry. I will not make the same mistake twice."

"You had better not," replied Ketalya. "Your grandfather does not tolerate fools, and your joking about it will not help you if he chooses not to be lenient."

Leaning forward, he kissed her cheek. "I will remember that, Mother."

"I am more concerned about your lack of bodyguards," said Sephil. "Did your grandfather have anything to say about that?"

"No," answered Zhanil. "He does not seem to think I will need them."

That evening, a missive arrived, ordering him to report to the city's recruitment office in three days. Other instructions followed, which Zhanil shared with his steward and bodyguards.

With Alassil's help, he made arrangements for his absence, and spent what time he could with his sister, enduring the moon-eyes and giggles of her ladies for an hour's walk in the

garden. Had circumstances permitted, Zhanil would have visited Arjuna, but although his friend had completed his initial training, Arjuna had written back stating that he could not yet leave the academy grounds or mingle with civilians, royal blood or no.

"Khalgar has such bloody strict rules about its soldiers," snorted Adeja. "In the first stage of training, yes, it's necessary to keep recruits shut up like prisoners to properly mold them, but he's past that, and now I have to put up with his mother's fretting that he isn't being fed or dressed warmly enough."

Since their argument in Ottabia, Zhanil had managed to obtain three letters for Adeja, who remained in far too sour a mood to write on his own. Arjuna still did not know about his father's injury, as Zhanil judged it was not his place to divulge this information.

"I tell the woman to leave off, the military knows how to feed and clothe its men, but she never listens to me where the boy is involved," continued Adeja. Heeding the physician's advice not to remain inactive too long, he limped about the apartment on the silver-tipped cane Zhanil had given him, harassing the servants with his irascible comments and barking at his wife when she urged him to rest.

"I'm not an old man to sit on my ass all day and wait to die," he growled.

Lahis did not argue with him, though she might easily have done so. When tetchy, Adeja swore like a drunken mercenary and threatened to box the ears of any subordinate who irritated him, yet time and again Zhanil noticed how he curbed those impulses around his soft-spoken wife.

Once she left, Adeja motioned to the door with his cane. "She isn't content unless she has somebody to nag. You see why I had to send Arjuna into the military? How else would he have become a man, with his mother hovering over him?

"As for you, Zhanil, it won't be so bad. I've been posted in some of the worst places you can imagine, but none of them were in Khalgar. You might turn up your nose doing latrine duty and be bored out of your head standing sentry and sitting around waiting for something to happen, but at least you'll be well-fed and clothed doing it."

On his last night as a civilian, Zhanil had Alassil send him a royal pleasure slave. With so many other matters on his mind, it did not occur to him until too late to ask Adeja how often soldiers were allowed to have sex, but from what little he already knew, he did not think his liaisons would be frequent or with partners of high quality.

The young man who came to him was one he had not seen before, with braided hair that fell to his waist and an insatiable appetite for lovemaking. Zhanil soon realized that he would get very little rest that night. His lover coaxed his flaccid cock to full vigor three times, using long fingers and a mouth that could not decide whether to surrender his erection or swallow his seed.

By the time his partner, moaning and clawing at his back, achieved orgasm, Zhanil was so spent and shaken that he was tempted to wake Alassil and curse him for his choice. Instead, he dismissed the young man as soon as it was seemly and flopped back among the pillows to claim what little sleep he could.

Deep sleep eluded him, yet as Zhanil dozed in the limbo between waking and dreams, it suddenly occurred to him that his grandfather might have sent the young man on purpose to stifle any desire for sex while he was at Medás.

If that's true, he mused, *then it worked*.

Just before dawn, Zhanil heard the latch and the nowfamiliar tap of a cane against the hardwood floor. He tried to feign sleep and postpone the inevitable, but when Adeja leaned over the bed and spoke in his ear, he had no choice but to open his eyes and sit up.

"I trust you had a busy night, my prince?"

Adeja's knowing look was too much to bear. Torn between shock and an urge to punch the man in the shoulder, Zhanil gaped at him. "Don't tell me it was *you* who sent that horrid slave?"

A broad grin told him the truth. "I thought you might appreciate him, my prince—"

"Stop calling me that," grumbled Zhanil. "You're being insufferable."

"You'll thank me when you're in the barracks feeling the urge to fuck a pretty boy or girl," answered Adeja. "Basic training in Khalgar is ten weeks, and it'll be at least that long before you're granted leave to go looking for whores. By then, you'll want to, but take my advice and make sure you keep to clean, reputable places. It won't do to have a royal son of Rhodeen and Khalgar come home with a sexual disease." Servants entered bearing clean water, clothes, and food. Zhanil ate and donned the plain, serviceable garments Adeja had selected for him before leaving. With him, he had the missive, a warm cloak, and a few other necessities. His other possessions he left behind, as clothing would be provided and regulations did not permit him to bring his own weapons or mementoes from home.

"You can send for some things later," said Adeja, "but right now they'll provide everything you need."

Amset waited at the door to escort him down to the recruitment office. Adeja accompanied them as far as the upper galleries before taking his leave. As expected, he could not resist imparting a few last words of advice. "Just do as you're told, don't call attention to yourself, and you'll be fine."

Etiquette forbade it, but Zhanil embraced him. "I'll remember that."

Gray twilight filtered in through the windows, and the galleries were chilly as the servants, already awake since before dawn, moved through a palace whose masters were just beginning to stir. Zhanil did not encounter his parents, both of whom had said their farewells the afternoon before, nor any other member of his family.

Leaving the palace grounds, Zhanil and Amset walked the main thoroughfare down to the Arvatates Gate, moving briskly among the early morning traffic: the merchants, servants, guards and officials who had business in the city's elite quarter. On any other occasion they would have ridden, but just as he was forbidden to supply his own armor or weapons, Zhanil was obliged to arrive on foot. The recruitment office was a small, neat building just south of the temple district, inside a compound arranged in a horseshoe around a central plaza. Many times, Zhanil had passed this way without giving any thought to the military arm of the city, yet now, aware of the male voices echoing off the pavement and encircling walls, he felt a twinge of resentment that he, a prince of the royal family, should be exiled to a distant outpost as a common foot soldier while the young men drilling on the parade ground would become the elite officers of the king's army.

Grandfather is trying to humiliate as well as banish me, he thought sourly.

Zhanil entered the recruitment office, handed his missive to the army scribe at the front desk, and was told to wait.

Looking around, he noticed several young men already seated on benches around the room. All had the same sleepy look and all carried small bundles. No one spoke.

He felt Amset's hand on his left shoulder, steering him toward the benches. "There are people ahead of us," said the lieutenant, in a tone that chided its listener for expecting preferential treatment.

Zhanil sat down on the hard bench, setting the bundle by his feet. "What happens now?"

"They call you in, give you a brief exam, then assign you to a barracks," answered Amset, keeping his voice low. "Since you already have your assignment, you might not have to wait as long, but don't expect to be at the head of the line, if you get my meaning."

A half-hour passed in the waiting room. Zhanil stared at the floor and plain walls, looking up with everyone else when a door near the front desk opened and a scribe appeared with a list. Names were called, men stirred and walked in, yet it was never his turn.

Finally, the scribe came out and said his name. Zhanil rose and walked over to the scribe, Amset trailing behind.

At this, the scribe put up a hand. "Sorry, but no one may accompany—"

"This lieutenant is authorized to escort the recruit," Amset answered firmly, brushing past the man. "Review your orders."

Inside, the scribe handed Zhanil a second missive. "Your information has already been provided," he said, "as well as affidavits from your physician, so there will be no exam. You will proceed to the barracks on the Street of the Smiths and there receive further orders."

Why couldn't you have told me directly, instead of having me wait here like so much baggage? Zhanil bit back his retort and took the folded missive. More frustration was likely to follow, he realized, and he knew it would not serve him to grow impatient. Soldiers were expected to obey without question.

A second, longer walk took him into the lower city. Zhanil edged past carts and women walking to and from the local markets, and brushed off persistent vendors trying to sell him fresh produce and other goods.

Bhellin's lower city was comprised of five quarters, each one with its own barracks, each one responsible for

maintaining its own order and defense. Zhanil saw soldiers patrolling the streets, and one of these directed him to the Street of the Smiths.

Once at the barracks, Zhanil handed his orders over to yet another army scribe, who, not surprisingly, told him to wait on one of the benches by the door. A few moments later, a middle-aged man came out and returned the missive while glaring at Amset.

"There's a post on its way to Medás this morning," he told Zhanil. "We're sending a few recruits out today, so you'll join them. The lieutenant can accompany you to the far end of Ottabia, but after that you're on your own. There's no place for rank and privilege in the army."

"Yes, sir," answered Zhanil.

To his surprise, the man scowled as if slapped in the face. "Do I look like an officer to you, boy?" Once again, he narrowed his eyes at Amset. "If that's what you're looking for, you've come to the wrong place. Here, take your orders and proceed to the Shuzalin Gate, and by the time you come back from Medás let's hope you know the difference between an enlisted man and an officer."

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Chapter Seven

"Why was he so insolent?" asked Zhanil as he and Amset walked down the street toward the Shuzalin Gate.

Amset laughed. "The man we met was a sergeant, an enlisted man, and enlisted men don't think much of officers. It's an honest mistake, Zhanil. You haven't had any real exposure to military life outside your private lessons, so you don't know the difference.

"As for your question, you're a common soldier now, so if a man outranks you he can be as insolent as he likes. I know you're trying to obey the king, but as your friend rather than your bodyguard, I'm going to tell you right now that it isn't going to be easy for you. Soldiers aren't supposed to have any individual pride; they're part of a unit, a cohesive whole. Forget you're a prince or that you have a mind of your own and concentrate on following orders."

The more Zhanil heard and experienced, the more he dreaded life at Medás, and his surroundings did not help his mood. Bhellin had a reputation as a clean city, yet the streets nearest the outer walls were fronted by dilapidated shops and tenements. Zhanil saw men and women walking around, collecting garbage from the gutters under the supervision of an overseer who gave encouragement in the form of insults.

Watching the beggars perform their mandated public service, Zhanil wondered what menial tasks his superiors at Medás would demand of him. Adeja had mentioned scrubbing floors and latrines, and working in the kitchen, jobs usually performed by unskilled laborers or slaves. Like the question of sex, it was a topic Zhanil had not pursued at the time.

"Aren't the royal guards also soldiers?" he asked, wanting to change the subject.

Amset stepped around a puddle. "Yes, royal guards are culled from the army ranks and given five years of special training. I can tell you from experience that it's a difficult application process."

"Adeja never has a kind word to say about the guards," said Zhanil.

"It's the bureaucracy of the palace government that he doesn't like, not the men themselves," explained Amset. "Khalgar has a very strict system, more than what he's used to, and if he sneers at all the regulations and credentials, he's made very sure that Arjuna has what he lacks."

For the journey to Medás, the king had been quite specific in refusing to allow Adeja to accompany Zhanil. "The foreigner is as lame as an old cart horse now," said Ampheres, "and is about as useful."

Zhanil, no stranger to such insults from his mother and grandfather, did not repeat the remark to Adeja, who had once confided that, in twenty years, the king had never addressed him directly nor so much as looked at him.

At the gatehouse they met the army post, presented their orders, and began the long trek to Medás. As a lieutenant, Amset could ride if he wished, and rented a horse, but Zhanil had to walk alongside the other recruits. There were two men, one about his age and one perhaps ten years older; this was all he knew about them until they were allowed to rest and relieve themselves at the morning break.

Bhellin still loomed on the horizon behind them, and would for at least another day. Zhanil tried not to look back, yet could not help it, and noticed that his companions did the same.

"Never been away from home before," said the younger man. "Don't know when I'll see it again. I'm Callias, by the way. I suppose we ought to know each other's names, since we're all going to the same place."

Zhanil introduced himself by his first name only, and made no mention of his family other than to say that they, too, lived in Bhellin. "I heard Medás isn't so bad."

"It's out in the middle of nowhere," said Callias. "I was hoping to stay in the city, or at least get posted to another city where things are more exciting."

"Listen to the boy complain," snorted the older man, who had given his name as Adarin, "you'd think he was enlisting because the recruitment officer told him he could visit a wine shop and fuck a different whore every night."

Callias blushed angrily. "I never said such a thing."

"But you were thinking it," finished Adarin. "And you, Zhanil, I've seen you talking to that officer. Do you two know each other?"

Zhanil nodded toward Amset as the lieutenant emerged from the copse where he had gone to relieve himself. "He's a friend of the family, just coming along to make sure I get to where I'm supposed to go."

"Are you a criminal?" asked Callias, wide-eyed.

Adarin boxed his ear. "Don't be stupid, boy. The recruitment officers don't take anybody like that."

"My grandfather enlisted me," replied Zhanil. "Amset is just making sure I don't run off and get into trouble."

They followed the road leading south into Ottabia, turning west on the fourth day. Fertile fields and lush woodlands gave way to a broad, flat country whose rocky soil sustained only the hardiest crops. Olive trees grew in abundance, though from experience Zhanil knew that the oil pressed from their fruits lacked the quality found elsewhere in southern Khalgar.

Villages and towns appeared along their route, yet save for the one soldier whose duty it was to visit the local market and obtain fresh foodstuff for the other travelers, the army post never passed through. Recruits were forbidden to mingle with civilians until they completed their initial training, and this also held true for the sanctuary of the Snake Mother they encountered on the ninth day; the men could not visit, but showed their respect by maintaining strict silence as they walked past.

At night, they slept in the open, erecting tents and building a campfire in untended fields. Spring days were warm and pleasant enough, yet after sunset the temperature dropped enough that Zhanil could not help but recall his winter trek through the Ottabian hills, and yearn for the comfortable yurts of the Turyar.

On most nights, however, he was too tired to do much more than wrap himself in the rough blanket that was apparently standard army issue and fall asleep. By day he was footsore, as were Adarin and Callias, who was vocal enough in his complaints to earn a firm tongue-lashing from one of their escorts.

"Soldiers march where they're told, when they're told, with their gear on their backs and their mouths shut."

Chastened to the point of humiliation, Callias did not speak to or look at anyone for the remainder of the day.

Having been warned to wear sturdy shoes, Zhanil found that after a few days his discomfort lessened and walking became bearable again. His private training had taught him that a healthy body could weather almost any hardship, and that marching long distances would be the least of his concerns once he reached Medás.

On the fourteenth day, they reached the hills that marked Ottabia's westernmost boundary. Amset stayed the night, taking his leave the next morning with assurances that letters would begin arriving in three months, once Zhanil was allowed to receive them.

Two days after beginning their trek into the hills, the travelers descended into the green wedge that was the valley of Aring. Sunlight gleamed off the broad, meandering river that flowed down from the mountains on the opposite end of the valley and ran southeast, forming a natural boundary with northern Rhodeen.

Zhanil gave the river a cursory glance. His destination lay in the gap separating two mountain ranges: the snow-topped Kirisk climbing north for a thousand miles before turning east to form Khalgar's northern border, and the Arpan, running north-south for more than three thousand miles, also turning east to encircle Rhodeen on its southern and western borders.

Where the two mountain ranges met lay the Irrend Pass, a gap of over a hundred miles guarded by two massive fortresses, Medás in the south and Sufhír to the north. Beyond this zone stretched grassy steppes, the easternmost expanse of the Turya-lands.

By late afternoon, the travelers reached the outermost perimeter of Medás, where they were met by a platoon of soldiers on horseback who escorted them the rest of the way.

As they passed through the first of three heavily fortified gates, Callias could not resist gawking at the structure looming above. Medás, like its sister-stronghold, had been painstakingly hewn out of the rock over the course of many centuries, so its true size could not be gauged from the outside. "Why, it's bigger than anything in Bhellin!"

"As long as the cots are clean and they've hot water for bathing," said Adarin, "I don't care how big it is."

Marching silently alongside them, Zhanil could not fail to notice the awe which belied his companion's words.

Men came out to unload the post, while two others ushered the recruits inside. Zhanil followed his companions and guides up broad steps, through thick, iron-banded doors, and into a wide hall alive with activity.

"You've arrived just in time," announced a man, his deep voice complimenting his grim, intimidating appearance. "Training began two days ago for the other recruits, so you haven't missed much. Tighan will show you to your dormitory, set you up with your kit and other necessities, and you can rest, but you're with us first thing in the morning."

"We just got here," complained Callias.

The man glared so fiercely at him that Callias visibly shrank. "The army doesn't care how far you marched or how tired you are, boy. Tomorrow you can learn that lesson by scrubbing your company's latrine."

While Callias brooded, Tighan came out to escort them up to the dormitory where they would spend the next ten weeks. An aide to the company sergeant, he immediately informed the new recruits that he had lived his entire life within sight of the two fortresses. "Now that the Turyar are quiet, this a good post for those who can get it," he said, pausing to allow the footsore men to catch up with him. "Do any of you have trades?"

Adarin gasped for air. "Why do you ask?"

"It's encouraged here," replied Tighan. "We import raw materials: leather for shoes and armor, tallow for candles, and so on. What time we don't spend on drills and sentry duty, we spend turning out finished products or use or trade. If you want to learn a trade, you can do that, too. Everyone is expected to be useful."

At the third landing, Tighan led them down a corridor to a warren of rooms where men quickly took their measurements and doled out clothing and shoes, all of it secondhand. Other men went through their bundles, removing items the army apparently considered contraband. Callias started to protest when they took a pouch of sweets, but closed his mouth before the words could leave his mouth.

Zhanil carried his pile of folded garments, boots, and toiletries back down the corridor and up another flight of stairs, following the aide into a long dormitory furnished with a double row of cots and plain tables. As he moved down the aisle, the occupants of the dormitory stopped to appraise him and the other new arrivals.

"There," said Tighan, motioning to a forlorn-looking cot against the wall, "you have 28B, and your friends have 27 and 29A across from you. The locker at the foot of your bed is for your things. Evening mess is prompt, and you get up before light. Everybody makes their own beds, so you're expected to do that properly."

While Callias sat in shock on the edge of his cot, his clothing and kit sprawled on the blanket behind him, Zhanil followed Adarin's example and spent the next several minutes stowing his belongings in the metal foot locker. Their neighbors wasted no time in introducing themselves and making half-hearted complaints about the rough accommodations.

"I just hope the food is better," said Miron, a tall youth whose prior experience had been herding goats in the windswept Ottabian hills. "Everything else is so gray."

His companion, a freckled, bony young man, nudged him with a broad smile. "There's no better army to serve in, and it's better than waiting on drunken customers in a Mittosian brothel."

"Is that what you used to do?" asked Callias, brightening somewhat at the turn of conversation.

"Yes, and it was a lousy job," said the man. "Listening to the whores fake it all day and night was almost enough to turn me off fucking forever. It was almost as bad as having to clean up after the customers; if it wasn't their puke, it was the come the whores didn't want to swallow."

When asked, Zhanil said only that he came from Bhellin. Fortunately, his failure to provide details was lost in the other men's eagerness to tell their stories. The talk continued through the call to evening mess, and during the meal. Though plain, the fare was plentiful and tasty, and the men retreated back to their dormitory with full bellies.

Archil, the former brothel-worker, produced dice which he claimed to have borrowed from another soldier, and the men played on the floor between the cots. Zhanil watched alongside Adarin until Tighan appeared in the doorway.

"I don't care if you gamble," said the aide, as the recruits scrambled to their feet, "and I don't care where you got the dice, but you'd better not let anyone else see what you're doing. Rules here are much stricter for recruits than regular soldiers, and you don't want to spend your first full day scrubbing the toilets or the kitchen floor."

"Too late for that," muttered Callias.

Clearing his throat, he glanced over at Zhanil. "The sergeant wants to see you," he said. "As for the rest of you, it's bed in two hours."

"What'd you do to get in trouble?" called Miron.

"Maybe the sergeant wants a piece of your tight city-bred ass," said Archil.

Much to the amusement of his comrades, Zhanil flashed them a rude gesture as he followed Tighan from the dormitory. Two more flights of stairs, added to the dozen or more he had already climbed that day, left Zhanil with aching

legs by the time he reached the second landing. Tighan merely chuckled at his ordeal. "You'll get used to it," he said. "Neddal's in here. I think you can find your way back down once you're done."

Within, an unadorned desk and chairs and a shelf lined with dog-eared books marked the room as an office. Zhanil stepped inside, closed the door behind him as instructed, and looked around, comparing his present surroundings with the luxurious green marble salon from which his grandfather administered his domain.

Behind the desk, his face only slightly softened by the glow of a single lamp, sat the grim man who had reprimanded Callias that afternoon. "Sit down, Prince Zhanil," he said, motioning to the rough chair across from him. "This is the only time I'm going to make a concession to your royal rank."

As Zhanil took his seat, Neddal continued, "You're not the first prince who's served at Medás. As I'm sure you know, your grandfather is rather fond of sending his offspring out here. I've had two of your cousins in my barracks, and I cut my teeth serving in the same company as one of your uncles. I'm sure you know by know that you won't be given a command, but sleep in the same barracks and eat the same food as the other enlisted men. You'll learn to march in formation, take orders, and stand sentry, and maybe if you earn the privilege you'll get to give a few commands. There's no place for royal airs here."

Zhanil had been dreading this sort of preemptive reprimand since before his arrival, and now it was all he could do to nod his agreement.

"Now that I've told you what's expected of you," said Neddal, "do you have any questions for me?"

"No, sir."

Neddal's mouth twitched in what might have been a smile. "I'm not an officer, but that doesn't matter out here. You'll learn the proper ranks and addresses along with the others.

"Having said that, I know perfectly well why you're here, and for someone who fucked up as thoroughly as you did, you're lucky to be alive. I'm sure you're aware that that's Rhodeen just across the river. Fifty years ago, this place wasn't so pleasant. Both your grandfathers fought the Turyar to a standstill here, and the countryside is still littered with the graves of the fallen.

"There's a town across the river called Nadeen. We trade with them sometimes, and our relations have been neutral to friendly for the last ten years. Turyar occasionally show up, but you're not going anywhere near them until your grandfather decides otherwise."

Zhanil nodded. "Do they come through the pass?"

"Yes, they sometimes come with their women and children on their way to Rhodeen, but the influx usually takes place farther south. These are peaceful exchanges, and you shouldn't have any occasion to interact with them," replied Neddal. "For now, you'll be confined to the stronghold and the immediate area. You'll have some off-duty time, and if I were you, I'd seriously consider taking up a trade. You may not think you need it, but from experience I can tell you that sooner or later your comrades will discover your rank, and you'll find it much easier to get along if you behave like everybody else.

"I can also tell you that a prince's stay here is usually commensurate with the king's displeasure, so considering what I've already heard, you might be here for quite a while. You'll want to make yourself as useful as possible."

Zhanil listened quietly, noting his own lack of surprise. "I didn't expect to be able to go home anytime soon," he replied.

Neddal smiled again, yet this time the gesture seemed less intimidating. "There's no soft living here, but it's more than tolerable once you're used to it," he said. "Khalgar treats its soldiers very well."

Glancing out the window behind him, he made a noise in his throat and nodded. "Lights out for your dormitory," he said. "Go get some rest, and tomorrow you'll see what I mean."

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Chapter Eight

"Your mother is driving me to distraction," said Adeja. "If you think she hovered over you as a boy, what she's doing to me now is ten times worse."

Arjuna gazed into his cup of wine, which he had barely touched. Around them, oblivious to their quiet conversation, moved the shop's regular patrons: off-duty soldiers and workers from the local bazaar. "You brought it on yourself, Father," he answered softly. "You should never have gone across the border, or let Zhanil go."

Shrugging, Adeja drained his cup and poured another, his third or fourth had he bothered to count. "As if I had any choice in the matter," he muttered.

"Don't you think you've had enough?"

Adeja ignored him. "While your friend is learning his lesson in the army and your mother is looking for someone to badger, I've got nothing to do. Amset and Nahar can get work elsewhere, but as for me: who wants a crippled old soldier? They tell me to go home, or go find a whore or wine shop. So here I am, boy, getting drunk like an obedient but useless veteran."

Had he expected sympathy from his son, Arjuna disappointed him. "Father, you're not a veteran. You never wanted to enlist properly."

"Listen to you talk," hissed Adeja, hearing the alcohol slur his voice. "Eighteen years old and already you think you know everything. Why the fuck *should* I have enlisted? I had a perfectly good service record, which everybody ignored, so why—?"

"That's the wine talking, Father, and your pride. Your service records from Tajhaan and Rhodeen aren't any good here, and you've always known that." Before Adeja could take another drink, Arjuna clapped a hand over his cup. "You've always hated the way the royal family looks down on you, so you wouldn't give them the satisfaction. You'd rather be stubborn, and now you're paying the price."

Adeja swallowed the urge to box his son's ears, if only because he knew that Arjuna was speaking the truth. "Oh, fuck it," he muttered. "It might be bearable if your mother didn't spend every free moment harassing me for being a fool, for not putting my leg up like a good little patient, for not cleaning my plate. She's going to kill me with her nursing."

"Mother has to have somebody to coddle," said Arjuna.

"Then get married and give her some grandchildren."

Arjuna answered with a rare smile. "In a few years, maybe I will, but not now."

"Oh, yes," said Adeja, rolling his eyes, "I'd forgotten all about your illustrious career as a logistics officer." Through his connections, he had learned that his son lacked his ambition, settling for a job tallying figures like a common clerk. "I didn't bruise my balls to get you into the academy just so you could push paper around. You'll never earn distinction that way."

"Father," Arjuna said slowly, "I never said I was interested in earning medals and honors. You're the one who wants those things, but I have no desire to lead men on long marches into battle and then order them to slash and pummel each other to death. I've seen men die that way. I never want to see it again."

Adeja nearly choked on his wine. "You've never been in battle, so where would you ever have seen such a thing?"

Arjuna answered with a set jaw and an icy gaze belying his youth. "I watched you do it to a man when I was four years old."

Whatever he intended to say, Adeja forgot. His throat tightened at the memory of his rage, fuelled by the sight of his bleeding son and the fever that had kept him away from the nursery on that day. Suddenly, he lost his taste for wine. "Arjuna," he said quietly, "you don't have children yet, but when you do, you'll understand why I did what I did."

Arjuna took a long, deliberate drink from his cup and stared. "Was it for me that you did it," he asked quietly, "or Zhanil?"

Adeja had never expected such a question, and did not know how to reply. "If you have to ask, boy, then you don't deserve an answer."

Arjuna shrugged. "As you wish, Father," he said. "As for your earlier concerns, I had no choice about the military, but things are different now. Logistics was my choice, and I'm not going to change my mind. The work is steady, the pay is good, and Mother won't fret herself worrying about my safety."

Leaning forward, he asked, "What are you going to do with yourself for the next twenty or thirty years, Father? Don't tell me that you're going to remain a royal bodyguard, because we both know things have changed. Zhanil isn't a child anymore, and when he comes home—whether it's five months from now or five years—he might not need you. You can box my ears and tell me that's nonsense, but you know perfectly well that you and I and Mother are all outsiders, and the royal family doesn't need us as much as you'd like to believe."

Adeja sat in stunned silence, wondering when his quiet, bookish son had grown so cold. Arjuna had always been somewhat aloof, a quality his father preferred to ascribe to his immaturity, yet now, after more than half a year in the military, his distance seemed deliberate.

"Serving in the royal household has been far better employment than working in your grandfather's quarry would have been," replied Adeja. "And what do you know about being snubbed, boy? You don't know how fortunate you've been."

"If you call the few crumbs we've received good fortune, then I suppose you're right," said Arjuna. "Just because I was Zhanil's playmate for sixteen years doesn't mean I don't know what it is to be slighted. Oh, he's been very good to me, but this isn't a matter of sharing toys in the nursery. Were you and I invited to the feast celebrating his majority? What about all those summers when you followed him to Adenna to watch his back? Were Mother and I ever invited to come along? No, Father, because we aren't as important as you'd like to believe, and if you'd been wiser, you would have planned for this day."

Suddenly wishing that he had not insisted on seeing his son, Adeja helplessly sat back in his chair. "It wasn't my idea," he said. "I would've rather seen you play with the other children in the servant quarters, but Zhanil's father wanted him to have a playmate and companion, and your mother was so touched by the honor that I couldn't refuse."

On this point, Adeja privately admitted that his son had more reason to be resentful than he would ever say aloud. From the very beginning, he had known the danger, and the problems the arrangement might cause later, yet he had chosen to humor both Sephil and Lahis, and perhaps—just *perhaps*—his own ambition had played a part. He had known it the moment the assassin struck unwittingly at Arjuna, and he knew it now.

Adeja paid the bill and, taking his leave, encouraged his son to visit his mother, which he knew Arjuna would do. Whatever low opinion he might hold of his father, Arjuna never withheld his affection from Lahis.

Remembering his own youthful strife with his father, who did not approve of his military ambitions, Adeja chose not to pursue the argument. At some point, Arjuna would either reconcile with him, or go his own way. As long as the boy continued to honor his mother, who had nearly died giving birth to him, Adeja grimly accepted the situation.

Even now, after four or five cups of strong Khalgari wine, he was not as drunk as he had hoped to be. Alcohol dulled his boredom, putting him into a stupor where he did not have to endure his wife's fussing or dwell on his inactivity, but it was not necessarily the end he wanted. Had he his wish, he would be working, yet after nineteen years in the royal household he found there were far fewer opportunities available to a man of fifty-four than thirty-five.

For a time after Zhanil's departure, Adeja had toyed with the idea of approaching his father-in-law for work, hesitating before deciding against it. Although Lahis maintained close ties with her kin, Lakhun regarded Adeja with disdain for seeking employment outside the family's limestone quarry, to the point where Adeja avoided gatherings.

Regardless of the increasing lack of other options, Adeja knew that he would apply for menial labor at the local workhouse before humbly begging for a job breaking rocks. For now, however, he still had his salary and post in Zhanil's household, but overseeing security for an absent prince did not fill his days as it once had. More often than not, Adeja felt like an interloper, or worse, someone whose usefulness had come and gone.

Twenty or thirty years, Arjuna had said. As Adeja hobbled up the street toward the palace, threatening rude vendors with his cane, the prospect of spending his final decades shoved into a corner, forgotten and unneeded, filled him with the kind of emptiness a man usually filled with alcohol.

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Zhanil gritted his teeth as he slathered the ointment onto his blistered hands. While every soldier took his turn scrubbing the latrine or washing dishes in the kitchen, the senior cook seemed to take a perverse pleasure in having the recruits using water so hot that, when combined with the abrasive soap used throughout the fortress, the task soon became uncomfortable.

"At least you got to wash dishes," said Callias, grinning from his cot. "That whole first week, I swear I smelled like shit."

"Strange," commented Zhanil, sniffing the air, "I didn't notice any difference."

"Fuck you."

Callias gave him a rude gesture, which Zhanil cheerfully returned. By now, the other recruits knew that he was of noble birth, and while his parents and grandfather might lament his penchant for using rough speech, in the barracks his old habits and general lack of airs served him well.

As promised, neither Neddal nor anyone else treated him with any favoritism, the result being that no one beyond a privileged few knew that he was a royal prince.

"Quit your whining, both of you," said Miron. "Doing laundry is ten times worse than scrubbing the communal shithole. I'd say half the men here don't bother wiping their asses."

Zhanil finished with the ointment, dabbed his fingers dry on his washcloth, and passed the jar to Phiro, who had suffered kitchen duty alongside him. Even with the narrow shutters open to admit any available breeze, the dormitory remained stifling, and all he wanted to do at that moment was sleep. High summer at Medás outdid Bhellin in its severity, for there were no gardens or fountain courts to offer an escape, and the lightweight wool uniforms did not breathe. More than one sentry collapsed on duty from dehydration and sunstroke, despite warnings to drink plenty of water and stay in the shade.

Zhanil's present discomfort was alleviated by his gratitude at having survived basic training. Seven of those ten weeks had been spent in drills: hours of incessant marching in any one of twelve different formations around the central courtyard, up and down stairs, across the battlements, and on the open plain below the fortress. With his comrades, Zhanil marched until his body ached and the rhythm of the drill followed him past exhaustion into his dreams.

Training to excess, he now understood, served a vital purpose. From the time he was old enough to hold a sword and sit on a horse, he had been trained to fight and ride, but with each new experience he saw that he had not learned the discipline which soldiers absorbed through repetitive drills. In stories, heroes won individual glory by the sword and spear. Real battles were won through tactics and resolve, with soldiers functioning as a cohesive unit.

From this point of view, Zhanil now realized how truly foolish his actions at Meduin had been: rash at best, suicidal at worst.

Once he mastered the drills, Zhanil had been certain he would excel in fighting, yet even here he fell short. What Adeja and others had taught him was how to handle a sword, spear, and shield in hand-to-hand combat; they had not foreseen the possibility of his having to fight in formation, which left no room for his individual style.

Thus he fumbled with a wooden training sword and wicker shield along with everyone else, and tried to coordinate his movements while maintaining his place in the phalanx. Not for a moment did he believe that his grandfather would allow him to fight as a foot soldier should Khalgar ever go to war, but with no assurances and no choice but to accept the training, he did his best to obey his instructors.

During a tactical lesson, he discovered a mystery which continued to befuddle him long after the exercise ended.

On a blistering afternoon, as the recruits chafed in their uniforms and yearned for shade and a cool drink, Neddal had gathered them on the battlements overlooking the broad pass and began a lecture about the value of foot soldiers in combat.

"Down there," he said, "is where we held off the Turyar fifty years ago. Some of your grandfathers might have fought here, and maybe they told you about it. You know well enough now to forget what you hear in stories. What I'm going to tell you now are facts, and no matter what else you've been told, you'll listen to this and remember.

"The Turyar aren't a threat today, but a good soldier can never be sure of anything. Yesterday we were friends with Tajhaan, but as things stand tomorrow we might have to fight them."

Neddal motioned westward, where a turreted outcropping obscured the view of the pass and the plains beyond. "You might think that if a horde of Turya warriors were to suddenly appear, you'd be finished. If you think that way long enough, you believe, and the Turyar know it. In fact, they're *counting* on you to run.

"Now here's the secret, boys: cavalry are no good against well-trained foot soldiers that stand firm. Fifty years ago, we were four thousand against ten thousand, but we knew how to use our infantry, and that's the reason why today you aren't speaking Turya."

Once Neddal took them down to the plain and staged several demonstrations, using borrowed infantry and cavalry units, Zhanil shed his initial skepticism. Still, as old preconceptions died, new doubts arose, for if his grandfather Brasidios had fought the Turyar here and knew the power of infantry against horsemen, why had he not employed those tactics in Rhodeen? And, going back farther, why had he allowed the border fortresses to fall into disrepair, leaving the Khishtil Pass open to invaders?

The Turyar could have been stopped before they ever entered Rhodeen, he thought. They could have been stopped at the gates of Shemin-at-Khul. What happened to cause such a disaster?

Zhanil could have inquired without playing the part of a prince, by approaching the question during the regular tactical lesson. He held back, wanting to ponder the problem on his own, to mull over the possibilities, turning them over in his mind as though within them was a message intended for him alone.

* * * *

When the steward's assistant handed him a scrap of paper listing that day's activities, Adeja stared at it, dismissed the man, and put his head in his hands. Had Zhanil occupied an estate rather than a suite of apartments, the list might have continued to be substantial, but with each day that the prince remained absent, Adeja had increasingly less reason to justify his ongoing employment. Certainly that was impression he received from the rest of the household, who observed his comings and goings with wary silence.

"Alassil told me I would find you here," said a voice from the doorway.

Startled by the interruption, and abashed at being discovered sitting at Zhanil's own desk, Adeja froze. "You shouldn't be here, my prince," he mumbled.

Sephil, dressed as always in his priestly robes, entered the room, softly closing the door behind him. "And here for a moment I thought you would insist on inspecting me for hidden weapons."

Adeja frowned at his playful tone. "Don't make jokes like that," he said. "You don't know who might be listening."

"Then let them listen," replied Sephil. "They will be terribly disappointed when nothing happens."

As he spoke, he sat down on the opposite side of the desk, close enough that Adeja could smell the soap he used in his bath, and under that, the faint musk of his skin. Even after twenty years, Sephil's presence still stirred forbidden memories. "What do you want?"

"I am not here to tease you," he continued, "but I have noticed that you have been in a grim mood ever since you came back from Ottabia. Lahis thinks your leg pains you—"

"She worries too much."

"If that were all, I would not be here," said Sephil. "I know that you have also been drinking more than you ought—"

Adeja glared at him. "That's none of your business," he growled.

Sephil cleared his throat. "I wish you would not make a habit out of interrupting me. Had you let me finish, I would have said that I do not think you have enough to occupy your time."

Rather than argue, as he was tempted to do, Adeja flicked the scrap of paper with his fingernail. "What did you expect? Your son is gone," he said. "An empty household doesn't need guards, especially an old, lame one who can't get work anywhere else."

He heard Sephil draw in a deep breath and slowly exhale. Tense moments passed before the prince spoke again. "That is self-pity talking, Adeja."

This time, Adeja slammed his fist down on the table, never mind who might be observing. "If you want to play the priest, go do it somewhere else. I'm not one of your fucking charity cases."

Sephil flinched slightly in his chair, but did not leave as Adeja wanted. "Zhanil might not return for some time," he said. "What do you intend to do until then?"

Adeja shrugged. "I don't know."

"If you are interested, the sanctuary could use an extra sentry or—"

"I told you, I don't want your charity!" Adeja surged up from his chair, shoving paperwork and a partially filled cup of wine from the desk; the fired clay shattered against the wall, its contents dripping down the whitewashed surface and onto the floor like fresh blood. "Don't you understand *anything*? A sentry has to be able to stand for hours, and my leg is no fucking *good* for that!"

As he went to stand by the window, he realized how hard he was trembling. "You don't understand anything at all," he said, fighting to keep the emotion out of his voice. "I have nothing to do here."

The next thing he knew, Sephil stood at his shoulder, touching his sleeve with tentative hands. "I *do* understand, Adeja. I know what it is to feel useless."

Rather than accept the comfort Sephil offered, Adeja brushed past him and hobbled furiously to the door, throwing it open. Outside, he saw the steward and two servants, all three of them drawn by his shouting, nervously looking to see what the commotion was about. "What the fuck do you want?" he barked.

His reprimand cleared the hallway. Turning back to the window, Adeja glowered at the prince, standing there with his pitying eyes and hands clasped before him, so *priestly*, so cloyingly *proper*. "Whatever you do, don't touch me. The last thing I need is for half the court to think we—"

"I am a priest of Abh," Sephil said softly, "and no one is going to say or believe anything other than the truth, which is that you need my help."

Adeja wanted to seize him by the shoulders, and shake loose his nauseating composure. Instead, he forced himself to stay where he was, willing Sephil not to come any closer. It did not matter what Sephil thought, only what salacious gossip reached the king's ear, and Adeja had no doubt that, even after so many years, Ampheres was still watching them. "I don't need your fucking help."

"Be quiet, Adeja, and *stop* swearing," Sephil said sharply. "I came to talk to you and perhaps offer you a job in the sanctuary if you wanted one. Now I am telling you, because you are so thickheaded that you cannot be trusted to behave sensibly."

"And *I'm* telling *you*," replied Adeja, gritting his teeth against another outburst, "I'm no good for sentry duty. That Tajhaani sword cut me halfway to the bone. I can't put much weight on my leg."

To his annoyance, Sephil merely smiled. "I know all this, Adeja. Bedren wrote to me and told me how badly you were injured. But you are forgetting that you once acted as a sanctuary guard, both here and in Ottabia, and the post does not require the same strict discipline as a palace sentry. You would not have to stand at attention the way you used to."

Hobbling back to the desk, Adeja sank down in the chair Sephil had vacated. "You can say what you like, but this feels like charity. I can't—"

Sephil laid a hand on his shoulder. "I would offer you work repairing the masonry, but Avorim keeps the sanctuary in good repair, and anything that needs doing is so high up that you have to climb a scaffold," he replied softly. "You cannot stay here like this, and you know it. You snap at the servants, you interfere with Alassil's work, and all the while you make yourself more miserable." Adeja let his head sink into his hands. "How long could you possibly keep me employed at the sanctuary before somebody complains about my lack of credentials?"

"Is that what this is about?" asked Sephil. "You know perfectly well that temple guards do not come from the military, and even if you have not had the same training, Avorim is not going to turn you away. The sanctuary does not care about a piece of paper, so long as you are not a criminal and have some experience. Unless, of course, you would prefer to find a job in the local prison, or ask your father-inlaw for work."

"Lakhun can go fuck himself," muttered Adeja, "and the prisons are a shit-hole no matter what the king says about their being clean and orderly. Condemned men don't need decent food or quarters, I suppose."

"You know my opinion about that."

Rolling his eyes, Adeja nodded. For the last five years, Sephil had extended his ministry to the city's prisons, tending the sick and crippled, and offering a few last hours of comfort to those about to die. Adeja thought it a waste of time, for once agreeing with Ketalya when she argued how dangerous and unhealthy such places were. "The best I can say about working in the city prison," he replied, "is that it was nearly as bad as being posted to Mekesh."

"At least Zhanil will know where to find you when he comes home," said Sephil.

Adeja snorted. "It might be five or six years before that happens. And when he does come home, what is he going to do with a crippled old man?" "That is nonsense." When Adeja looked up, he saw Sephil standing with folded arms, shaking his head. "Fifty-four is not old, and Zhanil is not going to cast you aside simply because you were injured. He has been raised better than that."

"Yes, he's had a marvelous education helping his father give alms to the poor."

"Adeja, I am tempted to slap you right now. Your self-pity is making my stomach turn."

"Then leave me alone," Adeja said harshly.

To his surprise, Sephil marched to the door, opened it, and stood expectantly in the doorway. "No, you will get up and come with me. Lahis will send your things along later."

Adeja did not move. "Go with you where? If you think you're going to drag me to the sanctuary and play nurse, think again."

Again, the adamant pose: legs splayed, arms crossed over the breast. "As a prince," said Sephil, "I can command others to drag you." Then, letting his arms fall to his side, he added, "Do not be difficult. I am not evicting you from the palace, and I certainly have no intention of making you my prisoner, though I would if I thought it would help."

Adeja made no move, instead letting his shoulders slump and his head sag. In Sephil's words, in the very tone of his voice, he recognized a phrase he had once used with a prince whose only visible talents were seduction and self-pity. *Do not be difficult*. How their roles had changed, and how unnatural it seemed. "You are not going to mother me," he said.

"Then do not make it necessary for me to do so," replied Sephil.

* * * *

Graduation brought new uniforms, letters from distant relatives, and expectations. Some would remain at Medás, while others would be posted to strongholds throughout Khalgar. Indeed, almost as soon as the men finished their tenth and final week as recruits, new orders arrived from the capital.

Zhanil, awkward in his crimson and gray uniform, sat on his cot and cast his forlorn gaze about the dormitory. Within ten days of graduation, companions like Callias and Archir had left for posts on the opposite end of the kingdom, with more departing as each post came in. As far as he knew, only two men would remain at Medás, and though no official word had come from Bhellin, he had no doubt that he would be a third.

Adarin and Miron had already vacated the dormitory to join their assigned units, leaving Zhanil to wonder what the delay was. By now, he understood enough about military life to know his frustration could just as easily be the result of the bureaucracy that plagued ordinary soldiers, but in the back of his mind he could not help but suspect that his grandfather had a hand in making him wait.

Without the everyday rhythm of drills and inspections, or companions to make the dull hours pass more swiftly, Zhanil spent his days in the chandler's workshop, dipping wicks in tallow to produce the many candles the stronghold needed. It

was not a trade he would have chosen for himself, but as he lacked the skills required for the other available jobs, he took what was offered. At least the chandler was friendly, allowing him to talk freely with the other soldiers who shared in his monotonous work.

On the first day, Zhanil had learned more than he ever wanted to know about candles, tallow, and wicks. Dyes and scents were expensive to obtain, took time to add, and resulted in candles that did not burn cleanly; the goal was quantity, not embellishment. Those workers with nimble fingers spent part of their shift braiding cotton, which Zhanil and others dipped in mordant and then wax to make wicks.

As summer began to wane, the weather remained hot, making work in the chandler's shop unpleasant. Zhanil yearned to join a proper unit and participate in the drills and other military functions of the stronghold. It did not matter that, assignment or not, he was still on active duty, and as such received regular pay: he had come to Medás to train as a soldier, and that was what he expected to do for at least the next five years.

Letters arrived from his family, and small gifts of money which he stowed away. His mother inquired about his health, and admonished him to eat and dress properly; either she did not know that soldiers had no say in the matter, or, as Zhanil suspected, she did not know what else to say. His father, on the other hand, sent news and belated wishes for his nineteenth birthday, which Zhanil had spent marching five miles across open ground, gasping in the heat and dust while trying to maintain both the required pace and the phalanx formation. Only that evening, lying exhausted and sunburned on his cot, had Zhanil realized what day it was.

Through letters, he learned things were not well with Adeja. Sephil had persuaded him to take a temporary job as a sentry in the sanctuary of Abh, but knowing Adeja's fierce pride, Zhanil suspected that his father's method of persuasion had been more akin to coercion than cajoling.

Zhanil did not need his father to explain how Adeja's injury, coupled with his stubborn refusal to enlist in the Khalgari army, limited his options. *I hate to think this is my fault. A fifty-year-old man doesn't heal as well as a twenty-year-old one*.

Several times he began to write to Adeja, but as he struggled to find the correct words, Zhanil heard Adeja's voice in his head, grumbling and dismissing the reassurance he seemed unable to accept. Each time, the parchment ended as a crumpled ball, until Zhanil finally gave up, sending his wishes secondhand through his father.

A month after graduation, he received two days' leave, enough time to visit a nearby town with ten other soldiers and spend money on alcohol and prostitutes if he so chose. After nearly four months without, and despite Adeja's best efforts to curb his lust, Zhanil did want sex, and on his first day out drank just enough that he did not care about his grandfather's advice. His loins ached for a woman, and the prostitute sitting on his lap, complimenting his good looks while pressing her thinly-clad breasts against his shoulder, gave him incentive enough to take her into one of the brothel's many cubicles and mount her.

That night, he spent in the little room in the inn the soldiers had rented beforehand, sleeping off his sour stomach while his companions went out looking for more entertainment. From the tone of the lecture they had all received before leaving Medás, Zhanil realized that young soldiers on leave were neither frugal nor well-behaved, and the way in which most of the others went through their earnings supported that.

The next morning, six of the men lay sprawled across their beds and on the floor, one in a pool of vomit that had missed the chamber pot. Zhanil gritted his teeth against the smell, shook his head at the man who lamely inquired if he had any money left, and went downstairs to get breakfast. He had done his fill of drinking, and as he did not plan to return to the inn except to meet his companions that afternoon so they could depart, he planned to spend his remaining leave in the marketplace and then, if the urge took him, once more at the brothel.

At midmorning, Zhanil met one other soldier, an older man who had come to buy gifts for his relatives and a local woman he was courting. Right away, Elem noticed how few items he had purchased. "Young men spend it all on whores and beer," he said, shaking his head.

"No," answered Zhanil. "I still have a little left, but sadly, my relatives have more expensive tastes than this. There's no pleasing them."

"How much did you pay for that?" Elem nodded toward a patterned blue-and-green shawl Zhanil had bought for Lahis, whom he regarded as an aunt. When Zhanil told him, the

man shook his head. "You young nobles don't know anything about haggling. You were robbed, boy."

In the few hours they spent together, Elem helped Zhanil barter for a trinket to send Ellina, and Zhanil treated him to a shared lunch of ale, cheese, and bread before they decided to wander over to the brothel.

Elem was not particular, finding a companion almost immediately. As he went with the woman into the back, Zhanil stood near the entrance, waving away the barmaid who offered him a drink, so he could look over the available prostitutes. The one he had enjoyed yesterday was absent, but no sooner had he realized this than his gaze fell on an enticing young man with light coloring.

Signaling to the youth, Zhanil paid the brothel keeper, and followed his partner into one of the cramped rear cubicles.

"You're from Rhodeen, aren't you?" he asked.

The young man nodded, adding that he was half-Turya in the bargain. "That raises my price," he said. "My name is Irzi, or anything else you prefer."

Zhanil started to undo his belt. "I didn't think the Turyar engaged in prostitution."

"Oh, they don't," replied Irzi, "but there's not much a boy can do in Rhodeen if he wants a hard cock up his ass. The opportunities here are much better." Smiling, he coyly approached and stroked the light wool of Zhanil's tunic, tugging at it. "If you want to spend your hour talking, it's your money, but I think you'd rather fuck."

Even in the smoky lamplight, Zhanil thought Irzi had the fairest lashes he had ever seen. "Actually, I prefer both." He

dropped his belt to the floor, pulled off his tunic, and let that fall, too. "You're wearing too much clothing."

Irzi drew back long enough to take off his shift and toss it in the corner where he had left his sandals. Zhanil kicked off his boots before climbing onto the cot, where he motioned to Irzi to join him.

Right away, Irzi's fingers went to work, finding the laces to undo Zhanil's trousers and drawing out the half-erect cock inside. "You have a nice one," he commented. "Do you want it in my mouth, or my ass?"

"Both," answered Zhanil, kissing him while running his fingers through the young man's shoulder-length hair, exerting gentle pressure to indicate his desire.

From Archil, Zhanil had learned that ordinary prostitutes rarely enjoyed their work, staying only because it was usually the only trade available to them; judging from the mean conditions in which they worked, Zhanil saw how this might be so. Still, as Irzi lavished his cock with a warm, wet tongue, the young man seemed to like what he was doing.

Zhanil propped himself up on one arm to watch him work. While having a woman suck his cock was a pleasant diversion, he did not derive the same satisfaction from it as when a man did it; very few women were talented enough to take a cock that deeply, and there were simply things another man just *knew* that a woman could not. Yesterday, he had enjoyed being inside a woman, taking pleasure in both the unfamiliar sensation of a female body and disobeying his grandfather, but this afternoon would be different, more relaxed.

As his mouth opened to swallow more cock, Irzi slid a finger between Zhanil's thighs, rubbing his balls to make him squirm, but it was not until that same finger moved farther back, exploring his entrance, that he spoke. "What are you doing?"

"Something you'll enjoy," said Irzi, releasing him with a slurp. He smiled impishly. "It's not what you think. Men come better with a finger inside them. You'll see what I mean."

From his experiences with the royal pleasure slaves, Zhanil knew what Irzi wanted to do; the young man was, however, the first partner to even suggest manipulating him this way. Curious as he was, his body resisted the intrusion, tightening when Irzi tried to breach him with a moist finger; letting a stranger do this to him in a dingy cubicle was more than he could take, and finally he shook his head. "No," he said. "I'm sure it's good, but no."

Irzi shrugged. "Some men come in and ask for it, but it's whatever you like, sir."

Placing a hand on the back of the young man's head, Zhanil urged him to continue. He let Irzi rub the sensitive skin behind his balls while sucking him, and within moments began to thrust his hips. Watching his glistening cock slide in and out of Irzi's mouth, coupled with the stimulation provided by the young man's fingers and tongue, quickly brought him to orgasm.

Once he caught his breath, Irzi checked the remaining time, and curled up on the cot beside him, kissing and caressing him until his erection returned. In touching his partner, Zhanil noticed that Irzi was also erect. "Do you get hard often?" he murmured in the young man's ear.

"Sometimes," Irzi whispered back, "when a man is goodlooking, or knows how to make me want it."

When he was ready, Zhanil sat on the edge of the cot and positioned Irzi on his lap facing him, so he could kiss his partner while thrusting. Irzi moved up and down on his cock, gasping and making little noises of pleasure that did not resemble the rehearsed cries Zhanil heard from the surrounding cubicles. That knowledge, paired with the time constraint, hastened his climax.

Breathing hard, his softening cock still buried in Irzi's body, he took the young man in hand and stroked him until he came. They spent the next few moments entwined on the cot, sweating and catching their breath. Irzi was the first to rise, producing a clean cloth from a hook by the curtain, and gave it to Zhanil, who used it to wipe himself down before dressing.

In the corridor outside the cubicle, Zhanil kissed Irzi's cheek in farewell. "I'm due to receive new orders, but if I return, I'll ask for you."

On the way out, he realized how foolish he sounded. Irzi probably heard many such promises, and many empty compliments, and responded with the same bland smile with which he had answered Zhanil.

When he met Elem and his other companions in front of the inn, Zhanil saw that the six who had drunk too much last night were still hung over and miserable, scarcely mobile enough to make the trip back to Medás. They arrived at sundown, giving Zhanil barely enough time to wash and stow away his purchases before supper was served in the mess hall.

The hot weather lasted well into autumn. New recruits arrived from Bhellin and the surrounding areas, forcing Zhanil to vacate the dormitory, but with still no orders Neddal had to find him a bed among the officers. The sergeant offered no explanation for the delay, and by now Zhanil knew that more than mere military bureaucracy was to blame. For now, he continued his duties in the chandler's workshop, at times grimly wondering if this was to be the sum total of his army experience.

One morning, he received orders to don armor and stand sentry duty at the top of the stairs leading down to the central courtyard. As cooler weather had already arrived, Zhanil did not fear sunstroke, but after an hour he began to chafe at the weight of his gear and the mind-numbing dullness of his job; having stood guard only twice during training, he never had much opportunity to inure body or mind to the task.

Of course, he heard stories about sentries falling asleep at their posts, particularly on sweltering days or in remote areas, but Zhanil knew better than to risk being caught. Even lacking proper orders, someone was bound to be watching him, and any lapse would surely find its way to his grandfather's ears in Bhellin.

As the sun climbed toward midday, and both brain and body rebelled at the monotony, Zhanil noticed movement in the courtyard. Not the usual coming and going of supplies,

messages, and recruits in training, but visitors riding in through the main gate. Two officers descended the stairs to meet the three men, whose foreign clothing and fair hair marked them as Turyar.

Zhanil could not hear what the men said, yet noticed that one of the Turyar bore both the hallmarks of rank and mixed blood. Gold bracelets twined his arms, and he wore a kneelength tunic of deep red bordered in green and amber geometric designs. The men riding with him looked old enough to be his uncles rather than his subordinates.

Once, the Turya glanced aside from the officers and scanned the battlements. For a brief second, he met Zhanil's gaze, held it, and looked away.

Although the officers made gestures toward the fortress, apparently inviting their guests inside, the Turyar shook their heads and departed, riding back out through the main gate and down to the plain toward the river. Zhanil followed them, and their retreating dust cloud, until they disappeared from sight.

At the end of his shift, Zhanil surrendered his pike to the incoming sentry, took off his helmet, and went inside. Dry from the cool, dusty air, he wanted a drink and a nap if he could manage it, though he did not think he would be able to do much more than close his eyes before the evening mess.

On the first landing, he encountered Tighan. "You saw the Turya visitors, didn't you?" asked the aide.

"Yes," replied Zhanil, nodding. "What was that all about?" "I don't know, but I've heard that one of them was Lord Kargil." Zhanil shook his head. "I've no idea who that is."

"We get Turyar here every once in a while. They're either migrating from the Turya-lands into Rhodeen, or riding up from Shemin-at-Khul to make certain there aren't any problems," said Tighan, "but that was *turkan* Arzhati's own son. Since you were standing right there, I thought maybe you'd heard what was going on."

All Zhanil could do was offer his apologies, even as he remembered the way the young man, who was a prince and his own distant cousin, stared at him as though in recognition.

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Chapter Nine

"Your orders have arrived, Zhanil," said Neddal, pushing a slender packet across the desk. "I don't think you'll be terribly surprised. Go ahead and open it and see what it says."

Zhanil took the packet, undid the seal with his knife, and unfolded it. Skimming through the lines of military verbiage, which did not resemble the orders his fellow graduates had received, he swiftly realized that he was reading a royal summons. "It seems that my grandfather wants me back at court. I thought he would keep me out here at least another year."

Neddal nodded. "Sorry to disappoint you then," he said. "Did you already know what it said before giving it to me?"

"When your orders arrive with an escort," replied Neddal, "it isn't much effort to guess. One of your lieutenants is here, a man called Amset, and two other guards from the king's own household."

After his morning duties in the chandler's workshop were finished, Zhanil was allowed to meet with Amset and finalize plans for his departure, scheduled for the day after next. "I knew you would want to ride this time," said Amset, winking at him, "so I brought Irie."

That afternoon, Zhanil spent an hour in the stable with his favorite horse, a curry comb, and an apple he had inveigled from the kitchen. "How is everyone at home?" he asked Amset. The other two men trailed a discreet distance behind.

"Your family is fine," answered Amset. "Arjuna is doing well in the academy, I've heard, and Lahis frets about him daily, as she always does. Adeja, however, that's another story. It isn't so easy for him with you being away, and there hasn't been enough work to keep him occupied. Your father gave him sentry work in the sanctuary."

The idea of Adeja working among the soft-spoken priests of Abh was so outlandish that Zhanil was tempted to chuckle, yet Amset's tone suggested it was not a humorous matter. "I heard about that. It seems a strange place for him to go."

"Not really," replied Amset. "Right now, it's the only work he can get. You can talk to him about it when you get back, but be careful what you say."

By nightfall, half the stronghold knew that Zhanil was not only a noble but the king's grandson, while the other half was just hearing the news. During the evening mess, Zhanil had to endure a barrage of teasing comments and questions, which he accepted with a good-natured smile. Many of these men he might not see again, and while he resisted attempts to address him by his royal title, he was not above enjoying a bit of fun with them. "Now that I'm the best chandler in the family," he said, "my grandfather won't have to look far when he wants fresh candles."

"He'll have you sitting all day next to a vat of tallow, same as he does here," said Tighan. The king's policy of cutting military expenditures by having soldiers manufacture finished products did not sit well with everyone, especially those who had enlisted to escape unwanted trades. "I can't braid a wick to save my life," replied Zhanil, "so all he's likely to get from me is a useless lump of tallow."

His comment drew laughter from others at the table. "That's what we get from you *now*," said one soldier.

After another day, in which Zhanil tried to smother his anxiety and keep busy by performing his usual duties, he left Medás. "I wouldn't mind returning someday," he told Amset, as they passed through the Aring valley toward the hills.

Amset shook his head. "A bit of soldierly advice for you, my prince: never fix your ambitions on one assignment, or get too attached to a post. It's out of your hands."

The journey proved uneventful, and on horseback they reached Bhellin in eight days. Because he had not received instructions to do otherwise, Zhanil remained in uniform, surprising his family when they first set eyes on him.

"I did not recognize you," said Sephil, embracing him. "You cut a better figure than I expected."

"I went through the training, but I don't have an official post, Father. There weren't any orders for me." Over his father's shoulder, he saw his mother standing by the window and remembered that he was no longer among his fellow soldiers. "I missed you, too, Mother, and Ellina."

Ketalya hugged him. "I did not expect to see you so soon," she said. "I will send someone to tell her."

"I bought her a trinket when I was on leave, but I did not have a chance to buy you anything," replied Zhanil.

"A soldier should save his money," said Sephil, "not spend it all."

Ignoring his mother's slight frown, which he imagined to have more to do with the suggestion that he had been drinking and visiting crude brothels than his failure to bring her a present, Zhanil smiled. "I still have quite a bit left. As I said before, I was expecting an assignment, but no orders have come."

Nodding, Sephil offered him his recently vacated chair and instructed a servant to bring refreshments. "Ambassadors arrived from Rhodeen about two months ago," he said. "These are not the usual emissaries, you understand. Since they understand our language and politics better, *turkan* Arzhati usually sends men of Rhodeen blood to negotiate with your grandfather. I have not been privy to this matter, but I can tell you that all of these ambassadors are Turya, and they are probably here because of you."

Zhanil waited until the servant, followed by a boy bearing a basin of steaming water and towels, entered with a tray of delicacies. His mind lost in the suddenness of his situation, he let the boy wash his hands while the serving woman set a plate before him and poured his wine. Only when they left did he feel ready to answer. "I suppose I should have expected this."

"Eat something, Zhanil," urged Ketalya.

Staring at the tarts and blush wine, he did not know quite what to do with them, and yet did not feel comfortable asking for ale and plainer fare. "Mother, I should have received my orders by now. Instead, I have spent the last two months making candles. If all he wanted was a chandler in the family, Grandfather should have spared me the military and apprenticed me to someone here in the city."

"You are making assumptions," said Sephil. "I think by now you know there is no point in trying to second-guess the king."

"I considered that," replied Zhanil. "Sometimes orders *do* get lost, but not for this long. Grandfather wants me back at court, and it's not because he's forgiven me."

"That is possible." With a questioning glance, Sephil sampled a mushroom tart from the tray. "Is something wrong with the food? Your mother and I thought you would be hungry after your trip."

Zhanil gave up the pretense of having an appetite and pushed his plate aside. "You should have waited until I finished before telling me about the ambassadors," he replied. "Then again, I haven't eaten like this in months."

"You are not going to worry yourself, are you?" asked Ketalya.

"I don't suppose Grandfather is going to give me an immediate audience." Zhanil gazed down at his lap. "I don't even know about the uniform. Am I supposed to keep wearing it, or am I on leave?"

"If you are allowed to visit with your family," said Sephil, "then I would say that you are on leave. I think you can put the uniform aside. However, you know your grandfather will be watching you. Do not do or say anything that might agitate him."

Female voices filled the corridor outside the salon. Zhanil looked up as Ellina entered, attended by her ladies. With his

sister's arms around his neck, pressing him for details about his stay at Medás, the time for serious conversation passed. Laughing, Zhanil disengaged himself and tried to dismiss Ellina's attendants, whose girlish interest in him had not diminished.

"Ah, will you not have mercy on a poor soldier?" he asked them, placing a hand over his heart as if any moment he would faint. "Your fair faces will undo me."

At last, it was Amarno, his mother's formidable chief ladyin-waiting, who evicted the girls. "Silly creatures," she grumbled. "Princess, I hope you have not left Lady Larien napping somewhere. Tiresome she may be, but you cannot trust yourself to these vapid maidens who surround you."

Ellina, on the verge of rolling her eyes, appealed to Zhanil, who thanked Amarno for her good advice and promised to speak with his sister. Once the woman was gone, he turned to Ellina and asked, "Well, where *is* your chaperone?"

"Oh, Zhanil, do not be tiresome!"

"Answer the question," Ketalya said sharply. "I will not have a fourteen-year-old girl running about on her own without a suitable guardian. Should I appoint a second chaperone and dismiss your friends?"

"Mother," groaned Ellina.

Zhanil smiled to try to put both at their ease. "Mother, with such friends, I do not see how Ellina could possibly get in trouble with a young man. With all the sighing and giggling they do, her ladies will surely drive him away."

Ellina made a face at him. "I will tell them you said so."

"Oh, come, don't be angry, sister. I brought you something from Medás."

"If it is a rusty sword or lumpy candle, you can keep it," she replied.

"Daughter," warned Ketalya.

Sephil laughed. "She will be a handful with her suitors, when she is old enough to have them."

As his parents spoke, Zhanil dug into the leather pouch he had carried upstairs with him and found the green glass cat, wrapped in muslin for the trip; he handed it to his sister. "Of course, if you'd rather have one of your brother's ugly handmade candles, I will be more than happy to oblige."

Ellina seemed pleased with the trinket, and kissed him on the cheek. "Are they really that bad?"

"Worse," he replied.

Before leaving, Zhanil stopped in the weaving room and, after greeting the servant women, presented Lahis with the shawl. She received almost as many gifts from him as his own mother, yet Lahis always responded as though each was her first, hugging Zhanil and exclaiming over his generosity. The other women, accustomed to her ways and as pleased as she was to see their prince home safe, smiled as they worked.

"Now here," said Zhanil, shaking out the blue-green wool, "you must put it on."

Lahis shyly smoothed back her graying hair and stepped into the shawl, letting him wrap it around her. "You're too generous," she said. Zhanil planted a kiss on her cheek. "And you're welcome," he replied. "How are Adeja and Arjuna?"

Her smile slowly evaporated. "Arjuna spends most of his time at the academy, and Adeja spends his days in the sanctuary of Abh. Not to complain, since he's better there than here, but I don't know, Zhanil. He just isn't the same without you to guard."

Nothing she said came as a surprise, yet it seemed to carry more impact coming from her. Adeja was such a strong presence in his life that Zhanil could not help but wonder how serious his situation must be to draw such comments from Lahis and others. "I'll go see him tomorrow, and I'll visit with Arjuna, if I can."

Lahis nodded. "You look very grand in your uniform." Appreciative murmurs came from all sides of the room, causing Zhanil to blush.

Still glowing, he proceeded to his apartments, where he conferred with his steward and rested for a few hours before changing his clothes to dine with his family. That night, Alassil offered to send for a royal pleasure slave, but Zhanil, weary from the long trip, declined. Instead, he spent several hours tossing and turning in a bed that felt too large for him, brooding over the entanglements which had brought him home.

After a light breakfast, he kept his word to Lahis and rode down to the sanctuary of Abh. His father would already be at work, praying and ministering to the many supplicants who came to make offerings to the god or seeking the spiritual or social aid the priests provided, but when the man at the gatehouse inquired, Zhanil politely waved aside an offer to inform Sephil of his arrival.

Once, Zhanil had hated this place, so small and mean alongside the grander edifices of the temple quarter, stealing his father's time and affection. Sephil loved the god better than him, better than his mother or sister. Even the poor saw more of his father than he did, and he despised them.

And then, one day a servant gashed his arm in the nursery where Ellina slept. When asked if he wished to send prayers for the man's recovery, Zhanil merely shrugged and went back to his toy soldiers. One servant was as good as another, and he could not be bothered to learn their names or care about their personal lives.

Ketalya had started to scold him for his rude manners when Sephil intervened. Always calm, always soft-spoken even when angry, he said nothing, confusing Zhanil all the more.

That day had ended in the sanctuary, among the denizens of ordinary people who came looking for solace, and Zhanil had to remember all his manners not to turn up his nose and sneer at them. "They have names and families," said Sephil, "and are no less than you."

"They're commoners," Zhanil whispered harshly.

"A prince is nothing without his people, so it is his duty to look after them. Obedience can be forced, but love must be earned. You *do* wish to be loved, yes?"

When Zhanil nodded, Sephil continued, "Therefore, you will spend the next seven days here, learning how to pray and show compassion."

Fuming, Zhanil had kicked the wall, painfully bruising his toes and earning scornful glances from those who happened to witness the royal tantrum, yet Sephil did not yield. Zhanil sulked, and then when he saw he would not get his way, did as he was told, warily approaching supplicants whose rough appearance or manners repelled him. At first, he could not understand why his father would choose to spend time with such horrid people, but as he worked, bringing food or water for them to wash, they addressed him. Each man or woman had a tale to tell, and some even told him of their own children. Zhanil listened, irritated at first, for he had not solicited their comments, but later, recognizing that the same humanity existed under their poverty and infirmities, he sought them out.

Although Zhanil never learned to appreciate prayer or the ascetic life as his father did, he left the sanctuary far humbler than when he entered. With his sister, who accompanied him once she was old enough, he became a regular visitor, bringing donations of clothes, blankets, and food while relishing the closeness with their father that he would not have known otherwise.

Adeja had no taste for religion or charity work, and had never seemed quite at ease in the sanctuary. Wondering yet again what he would find, Zhanil stepped into the gatehouse and was directed to a sentry post overlooking the entrance.

"I saw you come in," said Adeja. He leaned against the windowsill, his gaze focused on the traffic below. "I suppose by now you've heard what a mess I've become."

Zhanil claimed the footstool that was the cubicle's only furniture aside from a small table by the window. "Not really," he answered. "Either you're exaggerating, or everyone is just too polite to tell me."

Adeja looked at him. "Does military life agree with you?" he asked.

"More or less, though I would've preferred to be assigned to a unit rather than summoned home," replied Zhanil. "But you know I didn't come here to talk about myself. I know your leg has been troubling you, and that it hasn't been easy for you with my being away."

Whatever Adeja thought, he gave no sign. "I don't know what you've been hearing, or who you've been talking to, but everything is fine. Lahis likes to worry, and your father isn't happy unless he has some new charity to devote himself to. I'm here because your household is too small for the number of guards you have, and there wasn't enough for me to do while you were gone."

"Grandfather sent for me," said Zhanil, "but I can't say how long I'll be here. If you want to come back, you're more than welcome."

Adeja sighed heavily. "Amset and Nahar know what to do, and they've trained others. Unless something happens, you have as many guards as you're going to need right now."

Zhanil could not believe what he was hearing. "It isn't the same without you, and you know that. Don't start with some bullshit about your age, and don't try to tell me that you're a cripple the way you did in Ottabia. There isn't anything wrong with you. You can still walk, and Father tells me your leg has been better since you came here."

Adeja nodded, though Zhanil could see that he plainly wanted to disagree. "The treatments help a little," he said, "but a body doesn't heal as well at fifty-four as at nineteen. Honestly, I'd thought about retiring, except that, well, I don't really want to retire and this is all I know how to do."

Zhanil felt cold, hearing the defeat in those words; it made Adeja seem older than he really was. "Nobody said you had to retire. I certainly don't want you to, not now when I need you. *Turkan* Arzhati has sent ambassadors to court. I haven't heard yet, but I think they want to meet with me."

"Then you need an advisor, not a guard," said Adeja. "The only negotiating I've ever done with the Turyar is through the end of a spear."

Seeing how Adeja leaned on the sill for support, occasionally shifting his weight off his right leg, Zhanil stood up. "Here, sit down."

Shaking his head, Adeja refused the gesture. "If you want to make me feel better, then don't offer. If it's a question of dealing with the Turyar, Amset knows what he's doing, and they seem to like him."

Zhanil remained standing. "So you aren't going to come back?"

"Whether you realize it or not, what happened in Rhodeen was partially my—"

"No, it was *my* fault, Adeja. I insisted on going, and I insisted on fighting when you advised me against it. This

mess right now has nothing to do with you," said Zhanil. "Regardless of what you might think, I do need you back."

* * * *

As he looked out over the sanctuary courtyard, Adeja struggled to remember the adage a guard in Rhodeen once shared with him, something about old soldiers. At the time, young and proud, he had dismissed the saying as foolishness, but now, more than twenty years later, he realized how bitter fading away truly was.

No matter how badly Sephil wanted him to be content, Adeja chafed at life in the sanctuary; the piety and rules imposed by the priesthood of Abh suited him no more now than they had all those years ago when he had lingered with Sephil in Ottabia. While it was true that the sanctuary did not require the extensive credentials as the palace or army, temple guards were held to nearly the same exacting standards as the priests themselves, and the constant scrutiny was maddening.

The post, Adeja found, was not even worth the effort. While traffic flowed steadily through the gates, the stream of worshippers posed little threat; once in a while, a visitor, usually a drunken beggar, became belligerent and had to be subdued and escorted out, but these infrequent incidents did not justify the constraints, however well-intentioned, that Sephil wanted to impose on him.

Though it promised little more than glorified sentry duty, now that the prince was old enough not to require schooling, Adeja knew he would return to Zhanil's household even

before the young man asked. He could not refuse, no more than he had all those years ago when Sephil first asked him to look after the boy.

I should have, he thought. *I should have turned around, left Bhellin with Lahis, and forgotten about him*. Yet even then, he knew that such mental exercises were pointless. Guarding Sephil and his family curbed his restlessness as nothing else ever had, and after so long, Zhanil was almost as much his son as Arjuna.

* * * *

When the time came, Ampheres did not spare his grandson's ego, but spoke plainly. "Had it been my decision alone, I would have left you at Medás for your entire five-year term. Military discipline agrees with you, I am told, so I may yet send you back.

"I have summoned you back to court to placate the Turyar. Their ambassadors wish to see you in person, and they will not be satisfied until they do. Therefore, you will meet with them and explain your actions, taking care to be as neutral as possible."

"I know what to say," replied Zhanil.

Ampheres snorted. "If I could rely on your tact, we would not be discussing the matter now. Let us hope you do not further incite our neighbors. With Tajhaan growing more ambitious by the day, we do not need more enemies or threats than we already face."

Zhanil sighed, gritting his teeth. At that moment, he wanted more than anything to speak his mind and insist that

the barbs stop, yet dared not. His grandfather wielded too much authority over him for the satisfaction to be worth the risk. "Yes, sir," he answered.

Unwilling to leave the matter to chance, the king appointed a vizier to coach Zhanil, even to select his raiment for the meeting. "Of course, you will wear the colors of your mother's house. The royal blue of Rhodeen would be perceived as a threat."

"I *know* all this, Shallun. This isn't my first time meeting Turya ambassadors."

The vizier, ignoring him, invaded Zhanil's closets in search of suitable garments. Zhanil hovered behind him, rolling his eyes at Shallun's muttered comments about his lack of taste. "Why can't I simply wear my army uniform? That's red."

Shallun paused and shook his head hopelessly. "A prince does *not* wear a common soldier's uniform to meet with ambassadors," he replied. "And then, of course, we do not know what the Turyar would make of such clothing. Perhaps they would think that you mean to take up arms against them. You see, my prince, there *so* many considerations, and it is so difficult considering that one hardly knows *anything* about these foreign people."

At last, he produced a red silk tunic, a crimson velvet surcoat stitched with white threads and black trousers. "Such a *shame* you keep these items buried in your closet," he said petulantly.

Zhanil endured the same scrutiny when it came to his jewels, of which he had few. Shallun picked at the gold and silver pieces, clucking in disapproval. "I can see you hardly wear these, the silver is so tarnished. This will have to do, I suppose." He held up a golden ring, which Zhanil knew would be too tight; it had been given to him at fourteen, and he had never bothered to have it resized.

Worse than the ordeal of the closet were Shallun's attempts to coach him. Whenever Zhanil spoke, the vizier clasped a plump hand over his heart, throat, or forehead, threatening to have an apoplexy if his subject uttered another word. "Ah, you will cause a diplomatic incident if you go on like that."

"I *already* caused a diplomatic incident, Shallun," replied Zhanil, wondering if his grandfather intended to improve his manners or simply punish him by forcing him to endure this wearisome man. "Perhaps I should just keep my mouth shut and let the king do the talking."

"Oh, but that won't do!" exclaimed Shallun. "The king specifically said that *you* were to address the ambassadors and explain your behavior, but your speech is *so* crude, so *lacking* in finesse, I have no idea what we will do."

Zhanil knew he had reached the end of his patience. "Your constant vapors certainly aren't helping," he snapped. "I see nothing wrong with being truthful. The Turyar don't like liars and equivocators, and they aren't going to like me any better if I start putting on airs and using flowery language like some court dandy."

Throwing up his hands, Shallun declared the situation hopeless, but Zhanil noticed that he did not leave and did not entirely give up his attempts at coaching. Nevertheless, the histrionics stopped to the point where Zhanil could at last begin to concentrate.

When the meeting would take place, he had no idea, so when Shallun unexpectedly came one afternoon to dress and prepare him, Zhanil did not know whether to be pleased at the lack of a long, potentially nerve-wracking wait, or resentful at being summoned on such short notice.

"Wait in the other room," he told Shallun, as his servant brought in the selected clothes and prepared to dress him.

Shallun's eyes widened. "But, my prince-"

Adeja, who had followed him into the apartment, grasped a fleshy arm and steered the man toward the sitting room. "You heard what the prince said. Now be a good little vizier and wait outside," he said.

The embroidered surcoat felt stiff, with a high, tight collar that made Zhanil want to tear it loose. As his groom brushed away imaginary specks of dirt, a second servant smoothed back strands of hair that had escaped their braid and slid the golden ring onto his little finger.

Adeja came in just as they were finishing. Through the mirror, Zhanil saw that his limp was no longer quite so pronounced, though he could not stand for long periods of time. It felt good having him back.

"You look fine," said Adeja. "Ignore everything that fat windbag told you and just do your best. You know better than he does what the Turyar want to hear. Amset will escort you when you're ready."

With a forced smile, Zhanil endured Shallun's last-minute criticism, before Amset came to escort them to the private

audience chamber where, under the king's watchful gaze, he would confront the Turya ambassadors.

At the door, he dismissed the vizier and went in alone.

Ampheres did not rise from his throne on the dais, but Zhanil received a warm greeting from his uncle, Crown Prince Ettarin, whose presence he had not expected. "Do not worry," said Ettarin. "We have already met with them several times. They will ask you questions, but they are not hostile."

The king loudly cleared his throat. "You may confer later. Zhanil, take your place next to me and try to be sensible." With a nod, he indicated the chair on his right, set just below his.

No sooner had Zhanil taken his seat than the royal herald opened the doors at the far end of the chamber and announced the Turya ambassadors.

Four men entered, three tall and fair-haired, towering over the fourth, a middle-aged Rhodeen noble they had brought to serve as their translator.

Zhanil concentrated on keeping his expression impassive, so he did not hear the nobleman introduce himself or his companions until he uttered the name *Kalmeki, son of Harunta*. At once, Zhanil froze, his composure slipping as his eyes darted to the left and encountered a familiar face.

Why is he here? Unable to glean any clue from Kalmeki's cool demeanor, Zhanil looked away.

"Welcome," said Ampheres, gesturing to the four cushioned stools set out before the dais as he translated his greeting into Turya. Zhanil, who had picked up a smattering of the language during his stay in Rhodeen, was surprised to realize his grandfather knew any Turya at all.

The king waited until the ambassadors were seated before speaking again, "As your request was agreeable to us, we have summoned our wayward grandson back to court to answer for his actions." He paused for a moment, letting the Rhodeen nobleman translate his words, before continuing, "As we stated earlier, the boy meant no harm by the excursion, but you are welcome to question him as you wish."

Nodding, the nobleman turned to Zhanil. "I am Dyri Ariddes," he said. "I will translate for you, prince."

"Welcome, son of Arrideos," answered Zhanil, speaking in Rhodeen before turning to the other ambassadors with the Turya greeting he had seen used in Meduin, and learned verbatim from Kalmeki himself. "May the door open to greet you, may the hearth burn more brightly in your presence, as you honor us."

However he stumbled over the words, which he had practiced but half-forgot under the pressure, the Turyar seemed pleased. The eldest, a man with silver streaks in his beard, spoke first. "I am Nesha, son of Tarhun," he said. "We wish you to tell us why you did not come openly into our land, without the *turkan's* permission."

Having known beforehand which questions the ambassadors were most likely to ask, Zhanil should have found it easy to reply, yet the rehearsed answers stuck in his throat. "I did not want my family to know what I was doing," he finally said, "because I knew they would not approve, and I did not know how I would be received, whether I would be welcomed or held hostage, or even killed."

"And so you lied and crossed our border in secret?" asked Nesha.

"I went in disguise, yes."

"When you knew that this would be an insult to our people?"

Biting his lip against the frustration of being interrogated and having words put in his mouth, Zhanil turned to Arrideos. "Please explain to the Turyar that, having been raised in Khalgar, I did not *know* that it was an insult. I did not go to Rhodeen as a prince, but as an ordinary traveler." Looking again at Kalmeki, he waited for the man to say something, but Kalmeki remained ominously silent.

"Ask Kalmeki," he finished. "He was in Meduin at the time, and can vouch for the fact that I did my utmost to respect my hosts."

Kalmeki, eyes narrowing, drew a sharp breath. "A respectful guest," he said coldly, "does not bring lies to his host's hearth."

"Had I *known* your customs," Zhanil answered, switching to Rhodeen, "I might have done differently."

"Although we are honored that our guests wish to communicate in our tongue," interjected Ettarin, who sat on the king's left, "if it is feasible, perhaps it would facilitate matters if all parties spoke in the language of Rhodeen?"

Nesha nodded. "Agreed, that is best," he said, his accent so thick that Zhanil had difficulty understanding him. "Lies and masks do not suit us, so we do not understand what the prince would hope to gain by this when he could ask openly for what he wished."

Several possible answers sprang to Zhanil's lips, including a reminder of the savage death suffered by his uncle, grandfather, and several cousins, yet to avoid any further unpleasantness he chose the blandest explanation possible. "I was curious," he replied. "I wanted to visit Rhodeen, but did not want to cause any trouble."

"The boy is naïve, but well-meaning," added Ampheres. "Since his transgression, we have disciplined him, and given him proper instruction."

"And this is all?" asked the second ambassador, whose name Zhanil had not caught. "Young man, are we to believe that you do not have ambitions to invade our land and rule?"

Zhanil looked at him. "Yes, that is all," he replied. "I have a cousin in Tajhaan who wants these things, but I am not like him. I was not raised to be a king, and I have no army to follow me even if I wanted to become one."

Something in the subtle way the atmosphere shifted told him that, truth or not, he ought to have withheld that last statement. "I visited Rhodeen out of curiosity, nothing more," he quickly added. "It was foolish of me, yes, but I am very grateful for the hospitality the people of Meduin showed me and my companions while we were there."

This seemed to appease the Turyar, for when Nesha spoke again, his tone changed, "*Turkan* Arzhati sends his appreciation for your gesture. Naturally, he desires peaceful relations with his cousins and brother-king in Khalgar." "It is agreeable to us," said Ampheres. "Be assured that the boy has learned his lesson. There will be no further interference on his part."

Zhanil privately thought that his grandfather could have chosen gentler words, yet supposed he came off fortunate that Ampheres did not box his ear right in front of the ambassadors.

Once the ambassadors left, Ettarin rose from his chair. "The meeting went well."

"We will see," said Ampheres. "Boy, next time do not mention armies or ambitions. Whether you possess such things or not, the words sound threatening."

Zhanil nodded. "Yes, I saw that."

"No doubt you will meet with these men again before they leave. *Turkan* Arzhati has instructed them to learn as much as possible about you."

"Did they say that?"

Ampheres frowned at him. "Perhaps sending you away to scrub a barracks toilet was not the wisest course, as you remain hopelessly naïve when it comes to matters of state. These men stated their purpose as resolving this incident, but as I am no fool and would do the same in his position, I know Arzhati has given them further instructions. It is a shame that his ambassadors are not received in Tajhaan, as your cousin Ninarsha is the one who truly bears observing."

It was a simple question, Zhanil thought bitterly. *You did not have to insult me to answer it*. "Did they ask to see Father this time?"

"Not this time," replied the king. "Arzhati has great respect for the priesthood of Abh, and knows that your father is too dedicated to his ministry to be ambitious. He sent his greetings and a gift, but has otherwise chosen to let your father be."

Zhanil returned to his apartments, tore open the constricting collar, and called for wine. Through an open doorway, he noticed Adeja watching him. "Kalmeki is here," he said.

Adeja's smile disappeared. "What does he want?"

"I don't know. He hardly said anything during the interview, just sat there and glared at me. It was annoying." When the wine arrived, Zhanil took the cup and drank, much too quickly; he coughed, and droplets spattered onto his surcoat. "Damn," he sputtered. "He doesn't have royal connections, and no reason to be here except to irritate me."

"He might be a spy," suggested Adeja.

Zhanil coughed again, trying to clear his throat. "I thought the Turyar didn't use spies. After the lecture they gave me about deceit, you'd think the idea never occurred to them." As he set down the cup, he noticed the servant hastily mopping up the droplets of wine that had splashed onto the floor. "Leave it for now, Eshi, and help me out of this coat. It'll need to be laundered."

Adeja glanced at Eshi, then Zhanil, urging silence until the man had gone. "How long do the Turyar intend to stay?" he asked, once they were alone again.

"Too long," replied Zhanil, "and apparently they aren't finished with me yet. Gods, if I have to endure another moment with Kalmeki—"

"You liked him well enough when you first met him."

Zhanil scowled. "Don't give me that look, Adeja. These Turyar are so hot and cold I don't understand them. He was friendly enough in Meduin, but then afterward, who can say? I was no threat to him, and anyone else would have understood why I didn't give my real name."

"Perhaps he prefers goatherds to princes," answered Adeja. "All right, I won't tease, but you know better than to say it wasn't your fault. The Turyar are a tetchy race, and you're going to have to learn to live with it."

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Chapter Ten

Dashir returned from the hunt empty-handed and in a darker mood than when he had ventured out. As neither his wives nor his daughters cared what he brought back, if anything at all, the lack of game did not bother him as much as the men appointed to ride with him. Armajid introduced them as bodyguards, but their forbidding mannerisms told Dashir that these four had been assigned as minders rather than protectors.

Under his riding scarf, he gritted his teeth at the insult. Never mind that a man who did not know the ways of the desert stood no chance of surviving there unaided, but even should he manage the crossing, Dashir knew perfectly well there was no haven for him in either Rhodeen or Khalgar. Armajid knew it also, and had known it for twenty years, which made his actions now as inexplicable as they were aggravating.

Once, I rode the length and breadth of Rhodeen with real authority, thought Dashir, guiding his horse through the narrow, teeming streets of the lower city. *Men respected me, and followed me, and for a few precious days I was their Crown Prince*. Those companions who had protected his flight from Shemin-at-Khul, helping him and his Tajhaani bride cross the border had long ago been dismissed by Armajid, scattered until Dashir could not say what had become of them.

I am still the Crown Prince, he reflected, *and rightful king, however much Armajid likes to forget it*. But he would deal with that, and his overly ambitious father-in-law and son, if and when the time came.

At the residence, he did not encounter Ninarsha, but had seen his elder son from the heights near the east gate, drilling his chariot corps on the dusty plain below. Through his contacts at court, Dashir learned that soldiers throughout Tajhaan were preparing for an invasion of Rhodeen. However, when he asked what plans the High Prince had for Rhodeen once the Turyar were subdued and expelled, none of the eunuchs could tell him.

Dashir did not press them for more information, and certainly had no intention of asking Armajid outright. *To him, Rhodeen is a prize to be won, not a sovereign land. He has no plans beyond installing Ninarsha as a puppet-king.*

Remorse warred with necessity as Dashir increasingly prayed that his son would either be killed or incapacitated in the coming conflict, preferably the latter. *His mother dotes on him, and I know it is a sin to wish such a thing on one's own offspring, but he will never be agreeable. It would be better for him, and all of us, if he failed.*

Still, Dashir hated the thought, and despised the circumstances that made him ever contemplate such evil. Had his upbringing been different, Ninarsha might have made a fine prince.

At the gate, he dismissed his minders and paused in the inner court to greet his wives and daughters. Terreh, his

primary wife, acknowledged him with a perfunctory nod that was echoed by their daughter Saraji.

These days, he noticed, Saraji did not smile as she used to, and he knew why. At sixteen, the girl should already have been a bride and perhaps a mother. Dashir knew perfectly well that Armajid envisioned dynastic marriages for his children by Terreh, but for reasons unknown, the High Prince delayed in finding a husband for Saraji.

Taking after their mother, Terreh's younger sister Najai, Dashir's other daughters showed greater warmth, flocking to his side to ask if he had brought them anything from the bazaar.

"Not today, my dears," answered Dashir. "Had I known you wished something, I would have stopped in the marketplace. Now tell me, where is Nurad?"

The youngest girl pointed to the gallery above, her unseemly gesture earning her a sharp comment from Terreh, whose shrill tongue spared no one in the household. Dashir sighed, but did not bother to correct her. Bred for fighting and governing in a land ruled by strong men, he was an interloper among the women, and judged it best to let them sort out their own quarrels.

At one time, he had been passionately in love with Terreh, and she with him, but that had been long ago, before the reality of his exile led to disenchantment. He could no longer recall the last time they had lain together; he did not mourn the loss, and did not think she missed his presence in her bed either.

Upstairs, his son by Najai diligently labored over the day's lessons. Dashir loitered in the open doorway, observing Nurad with his tutor until the eunuch noticed. "Forgive me for not seeing you, my lord," said the man.

Dashir never ceased to be amazed at how his younger son's face brightened when he appeared. Nodding, he dismissed the eunuch and softly closed the door to ensure some privacy. "What have you been studying, Nurad?"

"Ramal has been teaching me geography." Nurad had his mother's long fingers, which he smoothed over the map on the table before him. "Today I asked him about the Turyalands, but he could not tell me anything."

"Of course not," said Dashir. "There is no information in the atlas except for the names of two cities, and no one knows where they are."

Nurad pulled his delicate features into a frown. "If their ambassadors came to court, we might ask them."

"Since they are our enemies, your grandfather does not allow it," replied Dashir. "But why are you so curious about the Turyar, son?"

"Grandfather wants to go to war with them over Rhodeen, and he intends to send Ninarsha into battle," said Nurad. "One should know as much as possible about one's enemies."

Smiling, Dashir reflected that his fifteen-year old son had intelligence and grace enough to compensate for the common sense his half-brother lacked. That Nurad could not master more than the rudimentary arts of combat or muster the drive to do so did not trouble his father as much as it might have, for it meant that he would not have to risk his younger son in battle.

Armajid did not balk at installing a half-Tajhaani puppetking in Rhodeen, but he was wary of upsetting the current laws of succession, which only recognized the offspring of monogamous marriages through the male line. Coupled with his quiet nature and the fact that the High Prince was already surrounded by dozens of grandchildren, Nurad's secondary status meant Dashir could raise the boy as he saw fit, and assured him a more placid existence than anything Ninarsha was likely to enjoy.

"Your grandfather has spies in Rhodeen," answered Dashir, "just as he has spies throughout his kingdom. A wise prince observes much yet says little."

Nurad looked at him, yet did not seize upon the warning as swiftly as his father would have liked. "Khalgar receives Turya ambassadors."

"Yes," said Dashir, "but this is not Khalgar, and they are no longer our allies as they once were. Policies and political alignments change almost as often as the weather. Khalgar refused to be agreeable and support our claim to Rhodeen."

"Khalgar supports our kinsmen, yes?"

Dashir tried to fathom the reasoning behind Nurad's questions, while hoping that no one else was listening. These days, Armajid perceived shadows behind shadows, as evidenced by the minders he appointed to watch his son-inlaw, and any other offspring he deemed troublesome; even his eldest son Mahtal did not escape such treatment. "Yes, unfortunately that is true. My cousin fled Rhodeen during the invasion, and married into the royal family of Khalgar. He now has a son who is just about Ninarsha's age."

These days, no one in polite circles mentioned the fact that Dashir was also related by marriage to the Turya usurper Arzhati. *That savage is my brother-in-law*, he realized. *I dare not even think it*. For that omission, Dashir was grateful, as he could not decide who warranted the greater shame: Thano for submitting to the conqueror, or himself for leaving her to the enemy's mercy.

Dashir went over to the window and, unfurling his riding scarf, sat down. "It was not a good hunt." Nurad, who enjoyed riding but not hunting, simply nodded and returned to his map.

With any luck, his son would not press the issue, as it was hard enough to discuss the succession without broaching the topic of the cousins who dwelt in Khalgar. Much of what Dashir had heard he dismissed as foolishness, for while he did not doubt that Zhanil Sephides had received an excellent education, the image of the young man's vapid, effeminate father as a dedicated priest of Abh who meditated and dispensed charity to the destitute was so preposterous that it could only be Khalgari propaganda.

And yet, as the years passed and the stories did not change, Dashir wondered if Sephil truly had undergone such a profound change. *Should I mock him, or envy him his lot?* Whatever the truth, Dashir knew that his cousin most likely did not lie awake at night despising his son or his current situation. He looked over at Nurad, bent over his work. *If not for him, I would have taken my chances crossing the desert years ago.* "Why are you suddenly so curious about these things?" he asked. "Has Ramal been saying things to you?"

Nurad shook his head. "No, Father," he replied. "It is only that if Ninarsha goes, he will have to kill his own blood. I do not think he has considered that."

"That is an unfortunate reality in war," said Dashir. And how it had always been done in Tajhaan: each succession anointed in bloodshed, brothers murdering brothers and nephews in dark corridors where such evil had been practiced for millennia. It was enough to make a decent man ill, even where he had been assured that his own sons would be spared when Armajid died and the new High Prince took power.

Of course, he realized, that is exactly what you intend to do, eliminate your own kin to place yourself and your offspring on the throne. When presented in such a light, the prospect of becoming king of Rhodeen suddenly did not seem so appealing.

Dashir smiled bitterly. "Such things do not trouble your brother. In fact, he cannot wait for the campaign to begin."

"I know," said Nurad, anxiously chewing on the tip of his stylus, "but I am afraid. It would be better if he did not have to go at all."

As he started to dismiss his son's concerns and reassure him that his half-brother had no fear of battle, Dashir stopped, knowing that if Ninarsha died without issue, Armajid would have no choice but to turn his ambition to the younger

son. He paused, studying the worry lines that furrowed Nurad's brow, and wondered if the boy understood more than he had realized.

* * * *

Any other ambassador Zhanil would have welcomed, and indeed, he enjoyed the time he spent with Nesha and the other dignitary, Lakkel. Kalmeki, however, continued to bewilder and aggravate him, saying little during their visits and giving no clue as why he, a man with no connection to *turkan* Arzhati's court, should be included in a Turya embassy to Khalgar.

Hoping to draw out Kalmeki's earlier friendliness, Zhanil invited all three ambassadors and their translator to meet his parents. Though she clearly wished to be elsewhere, his mother humored him and made the men welcome, serving wine and delicacies prepared from Rhodeen recipes. His father, on the other hand, did not have to feign his pleasure at a visit from the dignitaries, and at once engaged them in conversation.

Zhanil found his father's willingness to meet with the ambassadors a study in contrasts, for while Sephil professed genuine curiosity about Turya culture, he had not forgotten that these were the people who had killed his family. Of his family, he never spoke, except for his brother, and then with obvious pain.

However, Sephil not only welcomed the Turyar into his apartments, but asked them about his first cousin, who had been captured during the sack of Shemin-at-Khul and was now *turkan* Arzhati's wife. "I hope that Lady Thano is well," he said. "I do not hear from her very often."

"She does well, yes," answered Lakkel. "The *turkan* desires a wife for his son, but the lady says to wait, that Kargil is too young yet. Give him time to gather wealth and experience to please a woman, and marriage will come."

"Kargil visited Medás while I was there," said Zhanil. Nesha looked at him. "Did he?"

"Yes, but we did not meet. I was standing sentry when he rode in and saw him from the walls. I asked later, yet no one could tell me why he had come."

"That is curious," said Lakkel, "for it is no secret among us. Our people who live in the north of our lands, near Hapaniku, they come through the Irrend Pass and across the river when they wish to settle in Rhodeen. The *turkan* has charged his son with ensuring that the arrangement continues to be favorable to Khalgar."

That Arzhati entrusted his son, who could be no more than twenty, with such responsibilities, made Zhanil somewhat jealous; his grandfather was slow to delegate authority to his sons and grandsons, and even Ettarin did not have much authority within the kingdom.

Zhanil glanced over at Kalmeki to see how he fared. "You have not touched your food or drink," he said. "Is it not to your liking?"

"It is fine," grumbled Kalmeki.

Why no one else seemed to notice, much less comment upon, his awkward behavior, Zhanil could not comprehend. Nevertheless, it was a private matter, one that Zhanil would pursue later. For now, he ignored Kalmeki's brooding and returned to the conversation.

"Zhanil," said his father, "did you know that Nesha was the first Turya ambassador ever to come to Bhellin? You were eight years old, and sat between me and your grandfather in the audience chamber when Nesha came to court. Do you remember?"

While he had vague memories of occasionally having to dress in uncomfortable, formal clothes and appear in public, Zhanil could not focus on any one event. "I am sorry, but no."

"You were a curious child," said Nesha, "asking why our hair was so yellow and why we had such strange accents. It was a surprise to return after so many years to find you grown."

Zhanil started to reply that he had not lost any of his curiosity, yet reconsidered and asked, "What has Arzhati said to you about this recent matter? Is he angry?"

All three ambassadors exchanged uncomfortable glances, as though in chiding him for his initial dishonesty, they assumed he did not know how to be forthright. Even his parents, no doubt thinking him rude for agitating his guests, stared at him.

"At first, he did not like what he heard," Lakkel finally replied, "but your grandfather sent messages explaining the matter. Still, the *turkan* was surprised that you would do such a thing. Young men in the Turya-lands do not venture out on their own with such carelessness, and Kargil would never think to do as you did. That you are curious about our people, yes, we see this, and the *turkan* understands that you are young and somewhat unwise, but we always remember that in our own lands to be so curious is a deadly thing."

"Your lands must be very dangerous," said Zhanil.

"The Turya-lands are a great wilderness," answered Nesha, "a sea of grass as tall as the horse's belly."

"Certainly," added Kalmeki, "it is *not* a land for the weak or the foolish."

If only they were alone, Zhanil could have confronted him outright. *Wait, and be patient*, he urged. *The moment will come*.

Ignoring Kalmeki's infrequent barbs, Zhanil would have pressed for more information, but the reticence he sensed from the Turyar advised him to hold his tongue. Instead, he listened as they exchanged pleasantries with his father, and in the end he thanked them for their company while assuring them that he would make no more excursions into Rhodeen unless invited to do so.

When they were alone, his mother having made her excuses a short time past, Zhanil glanced over at his father.

Sephil nodded his approval. "You might not think so," he commented, "but it went far better than it might have."

"My only concern, aside from offending them again, was that you wouldn't be comfortable," said Zhanil. "Rather, I think it was Mother who didn't like them."

"She finds them uncouth and strange," replied Sephil. "You were too young to remember, but when the Turyar first came to Bhellin, I refused to have anything to do with them. However, your grandfather finally prevailed upon me to appear at court and receive them." "You mean he coerced you."

"In a manner of speaking, yes," answered Sephil. "Since the beginning, he has wished to maintain a neutral stance with them, and my hostility did nothing to help him. Sometimes we must put aside our dislikes for the sake of political expediency. I understood that, and they were extremely polite, yet even so, it took time for me to accept them, or forgive their actions in Rhodeen."

Zhanil found his wine glass on the side table beside his chair and finished what remained. "Have you forgiven them?"

"I accept that my father and brother died in battle, yes," replied Sephil, "though not what happened afterward to my brother's wife and children. The ambassadors mentioned it only once, yet never again, because Arzhati knows that no explanation will suffice. He has apologized and sent gifts, and on more than one occasion he has asked me to come to Rhodeen. I have always refused."

"You never told me this," said Zhanil.

Sephil looked out the window at the darkening sky, where rain threatened. "Because I have no particular desire to return to Rhodeen," he answered. "My refusal has little to do with trusting Arzhati. The Turyar are not liars, and when Arzhati guarantees my safe conduct, I have no reason to doubt him. He is also married to my cousin, and I know he wishes to forge closer bonds with Thano's kin for her sake and Kargil's, but I have never felt at home in Rhodeen, and my presence there could incite the anti-Turya sentiments that still exist among the old nobility. I cannot risk that, and nor can you." Zhanil sighed. "Had you told me this before—"

"Would it have changed your mind about going?"

"Probably not, but I would have done things differently."

When he returned to his apartments, Zhanil gave Adeja an abbreviated report of the day's visit. "Kalmeki is absolutely insufferable," he said. "Of course, he isn't going to get away with it."

Adeja narrowed his eyes. "What do you intend to do?"

"I'm going to have it out with him once and for all."

From his rigid stance, Zhanil saw that Adeja did not approve. "Are you trying to incite another diplomatic incident, my prince?"

"I intend to confront him, Adeja, not kill him."

"Then you'd better tell me exactly what you intend to do," said Adeja, "and not leave me guessing. I don't like the idea of you inviting this Turya here."

Just this one Turya, or any Turya? Zhanil knew better than to ask the question aloud. "He'll disarm at the door, and you'll be standing by to stop him if he tries anything. It'll be perfectly safe, except for his sullen manners."

That evening, Zhanil conferred with both Adeja and Alassil, making arrangements for the next day. Working from Zhanil's list, the steward took detailed notes, while Adeja, sitting by the fire, shook his head in exasperation.

"You make everything so complicated with your damned notes and lists," he grumbled. "These ambassadors aren't staying, and this one is so far beneath you he isn't worth your time. Just ignore the asshole. He'll leave soon enough." "You know what they say about ignoring an asshole, don't you?" asked Zhanil. "Pretty soon you're left with a lot of shit."

Alassil reminded them of his presence with a delicate cough, while Adeja groaned at the analogy.

Early the next morning, once he had eaten and bathed, Zhanil dispatched a message to the Turya embassy requesting Kalmeki's immediate presence. With Alassil's help, he had worded the missive in such a manner that it would piqué the Turya's interest and would guarantee his presence without insulting him. Nevertheless, with his limited knowledge of the Turyar, Zhanil had no way to know how effective the ploy would be until Kalmeki either answered his summons, or ignored it.

As he waited, and knowing Adeja would only smirk at him, Zhanil fought the urge to pace the foyer. *It isn't as though I'm waiting for a lover*, he thought savagely. Of *course* Kalmeki would come, unless there was some strange, unknown Turya custom that said that ambassadors must refuse any and all such invitations.

At length, Alassil entered the sitting room to announce Kalmeki's arrival. "As expected, sir," he said, "your guest is not in a good mood."

"All the better," muttered Zhanil, taking a deep breath to still the churning in his belly. "Show him in. Are you ready, Adeja?"

"To stick a knife in him, or watch you make a fool of yourself?"

As expected, Kalmeki wasted no time with niceties. "I am here as you ordered, prince," he said. "Now what do you want?"

"I did not order you," replied Zhanil. "I asked you to come. You could have refused."

"I am not here to play word games with you." Kalmeki glanced over at Adeja and scowled. "I thought I might find you here."

Adeja acknowledged him with a crooked smile. "I missed you, too, Kalmeki."

"There is no need for any unpleasantness," said Zhanil. "I asked you to come, and you came. Would you like something to eat, or perhaps drink?"

When Kalmeki refused, it came as no surprise. "Tell me what it is you want, or I will leave."

Zhanil sighed. "Very well, then. Since you value plain speech, I won't dance around the truth. I want to know why you're here and why you're so angry with me all the time. You weren't like this in Meduin."

Kalmeki folded his arms across his chest. "I did not know then that you were someone else, and not who you pretended to be."

"How many times do I have to explain why I hid my real name? I am not hiding now. I am Zhanil Sephides, prince of Khalgar."

"And a prince of Rhodeen," finished Kalmeki.

Zhanil rolled his eyes. "My father isn't sitting on the throne, so my claim there is nothing but words. You've met him, he isn't interested in ousting Arzhati, and neither am I." "Then you should have stayed home."

"I've explained that enough times. I was curious, nothing more. I mean, haven't *you* ever been curious about anything?" asked Zhanil. "Oh, wait, I forgot: the Turya-lands are so dangerous that curiosity kills people. Not that I would actually *know* anything about the Turya-lands, since your people are so damned secretive and no one's actually *been* there."

By now, he was almost shouting. That would not do. One did not shout at an ambassador, or a guest, especially if one was a prince.

One also did not do what Zhanil was about to propose, but he was not going to think about that right now. Instead, he watched Kalmeki's face, and the hands clenching at the man's sides. "If you want to hit me, this is not the best place to do it."

"I am not going to hit you," growled Kalmeki. Zhanil could not help but notice how his eyes darted to Adeja.

"Of course, you want to," continued Zhanil, "but before you make a fist, let me suggest an alternative."

"I do not—"

Before Kalmeki could refuse, Zhanil brushed past him and moved toward the door. "Come with me."

Kalmeki did not move. "Where are we going?"

"You obviously want to have it out with me," said Zhanil, "so we need the proper place. Follow me downstairs and I'll show you."

"I told you before that I did not intend to hit you," replied Kalmeki. "Something must be wrong with your ears, or your wits."

Zhanil did not move from the door. "Yes, we've already established that I'm young and very stupid. However, I don't think you'll be disappointed."

Clearing his throat, Adeja stepped forward. "Kalmeki, it's really not a good idea to keep the prince waiting."

The look Kalmeki threw him was priceless, but Zhanil did not pause to savor the moment. "Stay here and enjoy Adeja's company if you like, but I'm going downstairs. If you want to continue this conversation, you'll have to follow me."

It occurred to him that Kalmeki had a third option: to turn on his heel and leave altogether. The Turya, however, seemed not to realize that he had a choice, or else he wanted a confrontation more strongly than he was willing to admit. Grudgingly, he followed Zhanil out the door, through several corridors and galleries, and down two flights of stairs to a broad, circular chamber floored with fine-grained sand.

"What is this place?"

Zhanil watched him nudge the sand with his foot. "This is where the royal princes come to exercise and train. I learned how to shoot a bow and fight with a sword here." Stepping onto the sand, he pulled off his shoes and tossed them to the side. "I also learned how to wrestle."

Kalmeki frowned and drew back. "Are you suggesting that we fight?"

"Wrestle," corrected Zhanil. "It's not the same thing."

From the blank look his suggestion received, it was clear that wrestling was as foreign a concept to the Turyar as espionage. "I see I'm going to have to explain this," said Zhanil. "It's very simple, really. You try to throw and pin me, and I try to do the same to you. Whoever succeeds, wins."

"Not with the fists?" asked Kalmeki.

"No punching, hair-pulling, eye-gouging, choking or kicking the groin allowed." Zhanil undid his belt, and then his tunic, discarding both in a heap next to his shoes. "Take off your shoes and strip to the waist, and I'll show you."

Kalmeki remained motionless. "This is not necessary."

"You want to have it out with me, so this is how we're going to settle it: like men," said Zhanil. "Unless, of course, you're afraid that I might beat you."

Whatever objections Kalmeki meant to voice, the goad worked—exactly as Zhanil knew it would. Kalmeki undressed and stepped onto the sand.

Only then, with Kalmeki stripped bare to the waist, did it occur to Zhanil that his opponent was a good two inches taller than he, and broader in the shoulders with powerful arms that could probably squeeze the life out of a horse. Zhanil nodded his approval, while inwardly recoiling at the prospect of leaving the sand limping and in pain.

Nonetheless, a larger opponent had never stopped him in the past; it certainly was not going to stop him now. Spying the arena attendant hovering behind Adeja, he said, "Bring the oil, and have the bath ready."

"What is the oil for?" asked Kalmeki.

"You rub it on your arms and chest," explained Zhanil. "Otherwise it would be too easy for you to get a grip on me." When the attendant brought the oil, he demonstrated, slicking his arms, torso, and shoulders before handing the vial to Kalmeki.

Wrestling needed oil, he knew, but as Kalmeki prepared, the thought of that bare, glistening torso stirred Zhanil in ways that neither his childhood teachers nor his army sparring partners had done before. Kalmeki was no sinuous dancing boy, but a grown man who was probably going to pummel him into the sand once he lost his initial awkwardness, and dwelling on his physique would not do.

Zhanil turned to Adeja to dispel the tension. "Well, do you want to lay odds?"

"That you'll both be bruised and barely standing by the time you're finished, my prince? How much did you want to wager?"

Kalmeki did not share in the joke. "I am not here to play," he said. "You insisted on this, now let us finish it."

"As my guest, you technically have the first move."

"I have no idea what to do."

Because he would not move, Zhanil seized the initiative, dropping his head and squaring his shoulders as he tackled his opponent around the middle to try to unbalance him. But Kalmeki remained solidly on his feet, and worse, reacted with an instinctive feel for the sport, taking advantage of Zhanil's slippery hold to shove him back.

"Well," said Zhanil, "you seem to know exactly what you're doing."

"Are you accusing me of lying?"

"Do you really *need* me to accuse you?" As Kalmeki grasped his arm to try to pin it behind his back, Zhanil hooked a leg behind his knee and succeeded in unbalancing him. Kalmeki spilled to the sand, taking Zhanil with him, and for a moment they writhed in an angry tangle of arms and legs.

"In the Turya-lands—" growled Kalmeki.

Zhanil sprawled across him. "We're not *in* the fucking Turya-lands."

"I would put a knife—in your belly—for calling me a liar." With a grunt, Kalmeki rolled over, pinning Zhanil to the sand for the brief moment it took Zhanil to wriggle free.

"Who's causing a diplomatic incident now?"

A half-clenched fist landed in the sand beside his head. Less than a second later, Adeja was on the sand with his sword at Kalmeki's throat. "You heard the rules. No punching."

Kalmeki backed away before shoving the blade aside. "He wants to settle this like men. This is how men do it."

"Not unless you want to go back to your *turkan* in pieces."

"That's enough, Adeja," said Zhanil. He felt hot, gritty from the sand that clung to his skin, and sore. Every other bout in which he had participated had been friendly. Even in the army he had never faced a partner who really intended to hurt him.

His breath came hard, yet worse, he was no closer to pinning Kalmeki than before. "Do you still think I'm a liar?"

"If you were a real man, and not a boy hiding behind your guard, we—"

"What, we'd be shooting arrows at each other?"

Kalmeki answered by rushing and knocking him flat. Zhanil gasped for air, his ordeal made no easier by the weight covering him. He shoved Kalmeki off and to one side, pinning him down for the second it took the man to throw him loose.

Shakily, he stood up, Kalmeki following his lead. Both men were breathless, stumbling and blinking from the stray grains of the sand that had flown into their eyes. This could go on for hours, Zhanil realized, and neither one would win.

"All right, that's enough, boys." Adeja, stepping forward, placed his sword between them. "Go get cleaned up before we have to carry you two out of here."

"Who won?" mumbled Kalmeki.

"You're both equally stubborn shitwits."

Zhanil wobbled toward the attendant who proffered him a towel, while another servant came out to gather up the clothes and shoes discarded by the opponents. Kalmeki started to reprimand the youth, when Zhanil signaled that it was all right. "They're taking our things into the bathing room. We'll have a wash and then get dressed."

Steam, rising from the broad wooden tub against the far wall, fogged the tiled chamber adjacent to the arena. Zhanil removed his remaining clothes, laid them on the bench, and directed Kalmeki to do the same while Adeja lingered in the doorway. "The best thing to do," he said, "is go into the steam room first and scrape off the dirt, then bathe."

Kalmeki, plainly too exhausted to argue, let Zhanil direct him into another room where wooden benches surrounded a hearth mounded with heated pebbles; a boy, stripped to the waist in the stifling air, sat on the floor with the ladle and water he used to release the steam.

"We have such lodges in our lands." Kalmeki took the towel the boy gave him, wrapped it around his waist, and sank onto one of the benches.

Zhanil claimed a place nearby. "I didn't see a sweat lodge in Meduin," he said.

"Not in the place where you stayed, but there is one." Weariness mellowed Kalmeki's conversation, reminding Zhanil of how pleasant he had been at their first meeting. "In Rhodeen, sweating is done for cleanliness, but among the Turyar it is for ritual. The gods demand complete purification before entering a holy place."

"Do you have temples in the Turya-lands?" asked Zhanil. The warm, moist air made him drowsy.

"Temples are holy places built by men, so no, we do not have them. There are caves in the high places where women go to worship Azzi, and places open to the sky for all to worship the Storm God."

As they began to sweat, the attendants came in with strigils to scrape off the oil and sand. Once the grime had been sloughed away, Zhanil rose, relieved the servants, including the boy and left the sweating room for the bath. "Follow me," he said.

Adeja had elected to wait outside, and the attendants withdrew. Had they not been alone, Zhanil might have curbed his curiosity as Kalmeki stripped off his towel to step into the tub, but when the man turned he ventured a casual glance and was pleased by the sight of firm buttocks and thighs.

At once, Zhanil checked his impulsiveness and looked away, for he had no doubt that staring was considered just as rude among the Turyar as it was in Khalgar. *Kalmeki is your guest, not a pleasure slave. You didn't bring him here to seduce him.*

Hot water soothed sore muscles. Zhanil claimed the edge of the tub opposite Kalmeki. "For someone who claims to have never wrestled before," he said, "you did rather well."

Kalmeki, who had closed his eyes in the steaming air, frowned. "I did not say the Turyar did not know how to fight, only that we do not do so with so many rules."

"So it's just fists and anything else you care to use?"

"We use fists, yes, but no weapons unless it is to the death."

Nodding, Zhanil sluiced water over his arms, rinsing away the last traces of oil and sand. Tomorrow he would have bruises, but the profit was worth the pain. Kalmeki seemed to have forgiven him. "Are you of noble blood?"

Now Kalmeki opened his eyes. "For someone so young, your every word is a surprise."

"You don't look old enough to be calling me a youngster," replied Zhanil. "It was a simple question. Nesha and Lakkel are from Arzhati's court, but you and I met in a border town far from Shemin-at-Khul."

"Simply because you found me in Meduin does not mean I was born there," said Kalmeki. "I was born in the Turyalands. My father is a respected elder among the Shedyar."

"Who are the Shedyar?"

Kalmeki explained, "There are two great clans among the Turyar: the Shedyar and Vashyar. My people are Shedya, and dwell in the eastern lands, while the Vashyar dwell in the west. The *turkan* is also Shedya. And to answer your other question, he sent me because we had met before, and because you wronged me."

"By not telling you my name?" asked Zhanil, laughing. "Is that all, or did you prefer me as a goatherd's son?"

"I am not interested in your rank," said Kalmeki. "When you did not give your real name, you dishonored your hosts. To be a guest means to put faith in the laws of hospitality."

As appealing as the quaint, straightforward customs of the Turyar seemed, Zhanil knew the matter was far more complicated than Kalmeki and the other ambassadors implied; his true identity would have caused as many problems as his false one. "Did it ever occur to you that we simply don't do things the same way here, or that there are people in Rhodeen who don't like Turya rule, who would view my presence as an excuse to cause trouble?"

"The more time I spend among your people," said Kalmeki, shaking his head, "the less I understand them. You make things so complicated. All a man truly needs are a good horse, a bow, a yurt, and a woman to warm it."

"Then why did you leave the Turya-lands?"

Apparently disconcerted by the question, Kalmeki did not answer right away. "I came east because I wished to see the lands beyond the mountains," he finally said.

Zhanil laughed. "Ah, so you came because you were curious?"

"It is not the same thing," Kalmeki answered stiffly. "I came openly, and out of necessity. My father serves the *turkan* who is Arzhati's father, but for younger men there are not so many opportunities in the Shedya lands now."

"Is that why your people invaded Rhodeen?"

Kalmeki rubbed the sweat from his brow and the back of his neck; his fair hair clung to his skin like damp straw. Zhanil lazily wondered what Turya hair felt like, if it was soft or coarse. "For a prince, you have a surprising lack of tact."

"So only Turyar are allowed to be straightforward, is that it? In private, I think I should be allowed to speak freely."

"Are you asking about my homeland and why my people came to Rhodeen because you are curious, or because you are ambitious?"

Zhanil shook his head. "I told you before that I don't have those kinds of ambitions, or an army to pursue them even if I did. No one can tell me anything substantial about your people or your homeland, because no one I know has ever been."

"Our lands are a sea of grass," replied Kalmeki. "We have settlements and strongholds in the hills, but no cities. The first such place I ever saw was in Rhodeen. It seems to me a noisy, dirty way to live, even with all the pains the *turkan* has taken to ensure otherwise. Some of our people forget themselves in these lands."

"Living in a yurt out in the open has its drawbacks," said Zhanil. "It's smoky, it must be very cold and dark in the winter, and it doesn't seem to offer much protection."

"You have seen for yourself what our temporary shelters are like," replied Kalmeki. "The yurts in our settlements are larger and more comfortable, and protected by earthworks and stockades."

Zhanil visualized a cluster of yurts such as the one he and his traveling companions had used in Ottabia, on high ground surrounded by a perimeter of sharpened stakes and ditches, a forlorn spot on a wild steppe. As one accustomed to the splendor of Bhellin and Khalgar's other great cities, the image did not appeal to him.

Standing, he reached for the towel one of the attendants had left draped over the rim of the tub. "If we stay in here any longer, we'll turn into prunes, or fall asleep and drown. Come on, let's get dressed and get something to eat, and we'll call this business finished."

As he dried his face and rubbed his shoulders, Zhanil felt eyes on him. Looking down, he realized Kalmeki was watching him, his gaze level with Zhanil's thighs. "Is something wrong?"

"I did not realize that you cut yourselves," murmured Kalmeki, glancing away even as he spoke. "Forgive me, I did not mean to insult you. I was surprised, that is all."

Zhanil was grateful that the hot water and steam had already reddened his face, obscuring the blush that burned the very tips of his ears. Part of him wanted to drop the towel over his groin, while the other part wanted to invite Kalmeki to look his fill. "We circumcise ourselves to honor the Snake Mother, who sheds her skin the way trees shed their leaves."

Knowing it was rude, yet unable to resist, he chanced a look at Kalmeki, yet could not see very much under the water. "We're all men here," he said nervously. "I'm not offended."

Zhanil stepped out of the tub onto the raffia mat and covered himself, wrapping the towel around his waist not so much because he found Kalmeki's interest awkward, but rather because he did not want the other man to see how intrigued and, yes, potentially aroused he was. "I told you, we do things differently in Khalgar."

When Kalmeki left the tub, Zhanil knew he could have easily continued their discussion and satisfied his curiosity, yet common sense told him it was unwise. While he had no doubt that Kalmeki felt some attraction for him, the man was an ambassador. Indulging in a fumbling, sweaty tryst in the bathing room, or taking him to bed, was out of the question.

Kalmeki reclaimed his weapons upstairs, but declined a meal, saying he had tarried long enough. Zhanil nodded, graciously accepting his refusal, though when the man was gone and the servants had withdrawn, he stood by the window in his sitting room, gazing out at the gray autumn sky without seeing it.

I have to see him again, he thought. A moment later, he balled his hand into a fist and bit down on his knuckles. *This is absurd, and dangerous, and maddening. Arzhati should never have sent him*.

One solution remained. *Now that the ambassadors are satisfied, Grandfather can send me back into the army where I belong. A year or two at a distant outpost will cure me of*

this strange fancy, and by the time I return, Kalmeki will be gone. I need never think about him again.

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Chapter Eleven

Regardless of his best efforts, Zhanil's thoughts that night never strayed very far from Kalmeki. In the dark privacy of his bedchamber, he replayed their moments in the bath, his erection encouraging fantasies of kissing and fondling in the warm water, while strong hands stroked him to climax. At that point, reality coincided with fantasy, and he came in his hand.

Without waking the servants, he found some spare linen in the bathing room, cleaned his fingers and limp cock, and returned to bed feeling alternately sated and troubled.

When morning came, he lingered over breakfast trying to compose a message to his grandfather inquiring about his future military service. He aimed for an earnest tone that did not smack of desperation, which would arouse the king's suspicion, or arrogance. Just to be certain, Zhanil had Alassil edit his efforts, and once he was satisfied enough to send the message, he sent an invitation to Arjuna to dine with him that evening.

Two hours later, he received a terse reply stating that the junior officer in question did not currently have leave to venture outside the academy grounds. Zhanil did not recognize the handwriting as Arjuna's, and questioned whether or not his friend had even seen the invitation.

Apparently, his grandfather as king had clout enough to interrupt or even remove his offspring from military service, while his nineteen-year-old grandson could not even manage A Crown of Stars by L. E. Bryce

to secure Arjuna's company for a single evening. Zhanil bristled at the reminder of his low standing in the Khalgari royal hierarchy.

Feeling the need to escape the palace and his own conflicting emotions, Zhanil rode down to the academy, where his royal rank gained him entry to the offices beyond the public areas, and found Arjuna sitting in a clerk's cubicle, entering figures into a ledger. Arjuna looked content, and had even started growing a beard, but when Zhanil greeted him his manner was oddly distant.

"I take it you never received my invitation?" asked Zhanil.

"I got it," replied Arjuna, "but my next leave is in two weeks. Senior officers can come and go as they please, of course, but very junior officers like me have to do as they're told."

Normally, Arjuna would have stood and returned Zhanil's embrace; he did the former, yet gave no hint that he was accustomed to doing the latter. Zhanil waited a few moments, hoping his friend would relax his stiff demeanor, and finally commenting when Arjuna did not.

"Is something wrong?" he asked. "You act as though you don't remember me."

Sighing, Arjuna leaned back against his desk. "This army business is awkward," he explained. "As an officer, I outrank you, but as a prince, you outrank me. Which is it to be?"

"I'm not wearing my uniform right now," said Zhanil, "and I've never insisted on rank with you. You don't have to defer to me." Arjuna, however, did not relax, and Zhanil could not help but recall Adeja's passing comments that his son had changed since entering the army, becoming bitter and even more secretive, though Adeja never explained why. Zhanil thought that perhaps Arjuna still had not forgiven his father for ignoring his wishes and enrolling him in the academy, but if military life did not agree with him, Arjuna did an excellent job of hiding it. All that remained was the disconcerting possibility that his standoffishness had its source in something that Zhanil himself had done or said.

Zhanil attempted to lighten the mood, while at the same time trying to determine what troubled Arjuna. "When you go on leave, I hope you remember to come to dinner. It gets dull eating every night with the same people."

"I can't imagine that you would ever find my father's company dull. He never runs out of stories," said Arjuna. "If you believe everything he says, he's had enough adventures and bedded enough whores for five men."

While that had been true once, Zhanil did not bother to point out that Adeja had been unusually quiet and brooding of late, not bothering to embellish the few tales he did tell. These stories were grim accounts of months spent at outposts that Adeja had never before mentioned. *I had no idea he was at Mekesh when it fell*, thought Zhanil, recoiling from the name, which he and every other soldier from Khalgar to the northern Tajhaani border knew as a byword for a death sentence. *What could he have possibly done to have been sent there*? But Adeja never spoke of the infraction, and Zhanil sensed he would get nowhere by asking.

"One day you'll be a very senior officer," continued Zhanil, "so this who-outranks-who business will be irrelevant."

"Until then, I have to follow orders," said Arjuna. "Supper will have to wait."

Had that meeting been the day's final disappointment, Zhanil would have said it was quite enough, but when he returned to the palace for lunch, Alassil handed him a missive whose seal had already been broken; his bodyguards, having been trained by Adeja to search all incoming parcels and letters for poison, had opened the message.

Zhanil puzzled over the intricate knot work impressed in the amber wax. This was no heraldic device that he recognized.

"The message is from one of the Turya ambassadors," explained Alassil.

Gods, don't let it be from Kalmeki. "Is it now?"

When he turned the parchment over and began to read past the customary greetings, he froze in horror. Not only was the message from Kalmeki, apologizing for refusing yesterday's invitation to dine, but now he wished to atone for what he perceived as a slight. "Oh, no," he groaned.

"Is something wrong, my lord?" asked the steward.

Zhanil did not realize he had voiced his distress until Alassil inquired. "The Turya who came yesterday wishes to visit again."

"Shall I send back a refusal, sir?"

Letting the letter hang from his hand, Zhanil sighed. "I wish it were that simple, Alassil. If I refuse to break bread with him, I'll insult him all over again, and I can't risk that. Gods, why do these Turyar have to be so difficult?"

With no choice but to accept, Zhanil had a place set for Kalmeki instead of Arjuna, while shrugging aside Adeja's disapproval. "There isn't anything I can do about it."

Adeja nodded. "That I can understand," he replied. "Just smile and get through the meal, but don't leave your plate or cup unattended."

"Kalmeki isn't going to poison me."

"These Turyar are so secretive, who knows what they'll do?"

Once, Zhanil would have argued with him, but knowing what he now knew, that Adeja had been at Mekesh when the Turyar fell upon the stronghold and slaughtered its inhabitants, he did his best to tolerate his guard's prejudices. "I'll have Amset standing by tonight, if that's all right," he said. "By the way, I saw Arjuna before."

"Did you?"

"You don't sound pleased," said Zhanil. "Is something wrong between you two?"

"I enter the boy in the academy so he can become an officer and earn distinction," replied Adeja, "and what does he do? He goes and chooses to become some army scribe—"

"A logistics officer isn't the same thing as a scribe."

Adeja frowned. "I *know* that, Zhanil. He hates what I did, enrolling him against his will."

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Zhanil was quiet for a moment, wondering if Arjuna's bitterness extended to him as well. "He doesn't know what to do with me, Adeja. On the one hand he outranks me, and on the other he doesn't. Everything is about status with him."

"That's the way the world is," said Adeja. "Arjuna has always known that, but now he's in a place where rank is measured by the badge on one's sleeve."

That afternoon, Zhanil tried to reclaim the rest that had eluded him during the night, but his concerns about Arjuna and the coming evening to come kept his nerves on edge. After a fruitless hour, he rose, and with his groom's help brooded over his wardrobe, trying to decide whether or not to dress formally.

Alassil, who entered to consult with Zhanil about the meal, was able to offer some assistance. "Since it is not a public function, you do not have to wear your court best. Perhaps the green woolen tunic with gray trousers would do, and no jewelry. Now as for the meal, the main course presents no problem, but I have not been able to determine what the Turyar prefer for dessert."

Just before sunset, Zhanil bathed and dressed, gritting his teeth when he caught himself gazing at his reflection once too often. *It's a meal*, he thought, *nothing more*.

Zhanil's frustration did not end in front of the mirror. When he saw the dining room with its soft candlelight, he urged Alassil to light the brass lamps. "It's too dark in here," he said. "I don't think Kalmeki will like it if he can't see what he's eating." He picked over the silver and crystal, even the crisply starched linens, wishing the steward had set a more relaxed table.

"Of course, my lord," replied Alassil, "but remember that your guest has not yet arrived. Too many lamps lit too soon will make the room too warm."

"I hadn't thought of that," said Zhanil, hoping his anxiety did not show in his voice.

Though he spent the next half-hour praying for the evening to get underway and end quickly, when his guest finally arrived, it seemed too soon.

Kalmeki wore an embroidered knee-length tunic that buttoned in front like a coat; the amber color accentuated his fair hair, which hung loose over his shoulders. Unlike the day before, this time he radiated a charming smile belying his apologetic words. "Forgive me for forgetting the proper rituals. In our lands, it is customary to bring meat or cakes for the host's table, but I was advised that perhaps you would not care for such dishes."

Zhanil swallowed hard while doing his best not to stare. *If he is trying to seduce me, he's doing a very good job of it.* "The food I ate in Rhodeen was very good."

"It is not traditional Turya fare. I would have prepared something myself," said Kalmeki, "but digging a pit behind the embassy, dressing a goat, and roasting it for three days takes much work." Casting an expectant glance at the servants, he seemed troubled. "When friends dine, all in the household join the feast."

"It is not the custom here, and besides, I don't think the king would approve your digging large holes on the embassy grounds," replied Zhanil. "We have plenty of food and wine, or beer, if you prefer." Recalling how Adeja once commented that Khalgari beer was not very good, Zhanil hoped Kalmeki would find it palatable.

What he had not counted upon, however, was Kalmeki's insistence on trying every delicacy and drink offered, including all four varieties of wine. *Gods, at this rate he'll be pissing drunk by the second course*.

Kalmeki surprised him yet again, drinking sparingly from each glass. "The *turkan* does not drink wine at all. He speaks the language of Rhodeen because he must, but is very traditional in his ways and worship."

"Does anyone in his court drink wine?" asked Zhanil. The silk industry for which pre-invasion Rhodeen had been famous still thrived, which meant that the old customs persisted in some places.

"There are many nobles at court who are not Turya," said Kalmeki, "and the *turkan's* wife keeps many of her traditions. The lady speaks both languages well, and may come and go as she pleases. Arzhati only forbids her to visit the temples of the Sun and Moon, the great stone buildings that have been closed since our people have been in Rhodeen."

Zhanil knew he meant the pyramids that served as the center of the old dynastic cult, but at the moment he could not recall their names. "Do you prefer Shemin-at-Khul to Bhellin?" The question sounded lame even to his own ears, but he needed to keep the conversation flowing, anything to distract from the way Kalmeki's eyes remained fixed on him. A long silence would bring a flush to his cheeks, and encourage the kind of intimacy he wished to avoid.

"Many at court simply call the city Khul," said Kalmeki. "The sound is more pleasing to Turya ears. This place here is pleasant, though I do not care for many of the customs. Perhaps I am not much of a diplomat to say so, but yes, I prefer Khul."

When the courses were served, Kalmeki had no complaints about the food and ate heartily, while Zhanil could not muster enough appetite to do more than manage a few bites. At length, his guest noticed.

"You are not eating," said Kalmeki.

"My thoughts get in the way." Zhanil pushed the vegetables around the plate with his fork. "I have had a troubling morning."

"You are not alone in this, but a failure to eat does you no good." Kalmeki took another bite of meat, then set down his utensils. "You did not tell me there was a prophecy."

Zhanil stared at him. "What do you mean?"

"The sun at his back, the stars on his right, the moon on his left, he will rule the green lands where the horsemen dwell, and a crown of stars sits on his brow," replied Kalmeki, clearly reciting from memory.

"That's an old bit of nonsense from before I was born. I haven't heard it in years." While aware that he was not telling the entire truth, Zhanil tried to exude a casualness he did not feel. On two occasions, he and Arjuna had sought entertainment from fortune tellers, and though he disguised his identity to avoid a false reading, both times he had heard the exact same words. It brought dread, for he had no aspirations to be a king.

"My grandfather consults the oracle of the Snake Mother every time there's a royal birth, so there are dozens of prophecies in the family," he added, reflecting on the ridiculous prediction that his sister would marry the light of the land. "I don't think much about it."

If anything, his reply confused Kalmeki. "You do not believe in the truth of such visions?"

"Prophecies are such tricky things," answered Zhanil, repeating what his father often told him. "Sometimes they're a play on words, and mean something entirely different than what you think. The oracle is bitten by a poisonous serpent and speaks in gibberish during her trance. A priest interprets what she says according to what he thinks the person wants to hear, so that more money and gifts will come to the temple."

"We have a different way," said Kalmeki. "Our shamans commune openly with the spirits, so all can see and hear the truth of their visions, and we ourselves sometimes seek communion with the spirits. Every young man who wishes to become a warrior must fast and purify himself, and go apart from the clan into the wilderness. During his trial, the spirits might find him and speak."

Although it intrigued him, the talk of spirits, visions, and prophecies also made Zhanil uncomfortable. "Your warriors don't have formal training, like our army?"

"We have that also, but boys train for war and the hunt as soon as they are old enough to sit on a horse," replied Kalmeki. "A father teaches his sons to fight, ride, and make his own weapons, for if a man wishes to be a warrior, he must make his own spear and bow, and break his own horse. There are other tests, but these are secrets kept by our people. I can only tell you that if a man passes these trials and is found pure, he may serve under a chieftain or *turkan*, and learn to go to war. You did the same, did you not?"

Zhanil thought it wiser not to mention his experience dipping candles at Medás. "As a boy I had my own tutors. I learned how to ride and fight, and in the army I learned how to march and follow orders. As for the rest, I don't think you and I have the same ideas about war or politics."

"Our ways are quite simple; it is *your* ways which are confusing," said Kalmeki, his light manner preventing the comment from sounding like an insult. "In your cities there is too much noise and color, too much to remember. I sometimes yearn for home. It is not uncommon for those who have come east."

"Then why did your people cross the mountains in the first place?" asked Zhanil.

"That was so long ago I could not tell you, but in earlier times we came for the rich goods we could seize from merchants and settlements along trade routes. Then we saw how green and plentiful your lands were, how good they were for grazing and growing food, so we wished to settle."

Zhanil set down his glass. "And you had to invade to do it?"

Kalmeki shook his head. "You do not understand. It is not simply a matter of entering your lands and settling peacefully,

which we never could have done. To you, we are savages and you would not have welcomed us. Yes, we are fierce in war, but we are not savages. Those who were willing to accept Turya ways were spared. Life for them under our rule has been good, and they have taught us much about our new land that we would not have learned otherwise.

"Let us not argue about these things. Tell me, whose idea was it to have you pretend to be a goatherd?"

"That was Adeja's idea," replied Zhanil. "He also suggested the name. Lakhun is his father-in-law."

"His wife's father?" mused Kalmeki. "Then he must be very fond of the man, to honor him so."

Unfortunately, he chose to comment just as Zhanil took a sip from his glass. Zhanil sputtered, choking wine through his nose. "No," he gasped, "Adeja doesn't like him at all."

A moment later, Kalmeki was beside him, applying a firm blow to his back that eased his coughing. "A strange joke, I think, but perhaps it is fitting. I take it this Lakhun does not know the circumstances of your adventure?"

Zhanil coughed one last time to clear his throat. "I don't think Adeja's talked to him in years."

With Kalmeki's hand still resting on his shoulders, Zhanil became aware of their proximity. Their knees touched under the table, and in the warm lamplight Kalmeki's cheeks glowed an enticing pink, as though he were abashed, or had simply drunk more wine than he should have.

Kalmeki leaned close enough that his breath ghosted Zhanil's cheek. "For such a beginning as we have had, this has been a good evening. If the *turkan* allows it, you should come to Khul and see for yourself how things are."

"That was what I wanted to," murmured Zhanil.

Lips suddenly touched his, warm and inviting. Startled, his face burning, he drew back. "Is this another Turya custom I don't know about?" he asked.

At once, Kalmeki pulled away. "No, but you must forgive me. I have been rude in assuming that you.... Perhaps I have drunk too much wine. I should go."

No, you meant to do this. As Kalmeki started to rise, Zhanil grasped his wrist to stop him. "Tomorrow you'll send me a message wanting to make up for the insult and then turn up at my door with a goat on a spit."

Kalmeki laughed harshly. "I think perhaps the situation demands that I bring you a fine horse instead. I am sorry, for my actions now and my comments yesterday. I mistook your interest, nothing more."

"*My* interest?" sputtered Zhanil. "What is *your* interest in me?"

Clearly ashamed, Kalmeki turned aside. "As a guest, my actions are inexcusable. I do not wish leave you with ill thoughts of my people. The Turyar do not do such things."

Since he was so vague, Zhanil was left to guess at his meaning. "Do you prefer men?"

Kalmeki let his head drop and stared at his hands. "In my lands, I would be stoned simply for saying it, so I will not. Neither will I lie. I do my best to follow the proper path, but my spirit desires things it should not want." "There are places in the city where you can find a boy," said Zhanil. "I would be happy to—"

"You do not understand what I am telling you," replied Kalmeki. "To lie with another male is an unclean thing, and this selling of sex that your people engage in, we do not do this in the Turya-lands or in Rhodeen. When the *turkan* came to Khul, he made the women who did these things purify themselves and take husbands, or leave altogether."

"What did he do with the boys?" Zhanil was not so certain that he wanted to know.

"Our warriors drove them into the river and drowned them," said Kalmeki. "They did the same with the men who had their parts removed, the ones you call eunuchs. These were unnatural creatures, and could not be cleansed." Regret colored his words, and Zhanil knew he was imagining his own potential fate.

Had Kalmeki known who he was back in the lodging house at Meduin, when they exchanged suggestive glances over a conversation that Zhanil scarcely remembered? It was inconceivable that a warrior, even one who secretly wanted other men, would show erotic interest in a young goatherd, a person of no consequence, unless it really was attraction and not ulterior motive.

"Kalmeki," Zhanil finally said, "in our lands there is a difference. A man can go into a boy as well as a woman and still be a man as long as he doesn't allow himself to be used like a woman. Do you understand what I mean? If you want me to send for one of the royal pleasure slaves, you can see for yourself." Not surprisingly, Kalmeki refused. "I would not go into one who had been defiled thus."

"But you thought to do the same with me."

"You misunderstand me. Azzi made men and women differently, so it makes no sense to lie with one as with the other," said Kalmeki. "I only wished to be close, not to do what was unnatural. Again, you must forgive me. I did not mean to insult you."

"Stop apologizing, Kalmeki. You are not insulting me." Before Kalmeki could argue, Zhanil closed the distance between them with his mouth, firmly returning the earlier kiss until familiarity banished embarrassment and earned a response.

For one who claimed to have never bedded a man, Kalmeki certainly knew how to kiss one, employing lips and tongue in equal measure while letting his hands roam the length of Zhanil's spine. Zhanil circled his waist with one arm, cupping firm buttocks and pulling him closer as he let his other hand slide along the outside of Kalmeki's thigh.

Had Kalmeki been a catamite, Zhanil would have already ventured under the hem of his partner's tunic and begun to undress him. He would have undone his own laces to draw out his cock and fondle it until his lover, reading his cues, bent to suck on it. Where he wanted to do these things, and ached with the need to proceed cautiously in this unfamiliar territory, Zhanil held back.

At the back of his thoughts, he knew their tryst was unwise, even treacherous. Not only could Amset or Alassil, or another servant enter the room unannounced and discover them, but Kalmeki, for all his claims, might be less than trustworthy. *He's wanted to do this since the beginning*.

That makes two of us. Zhanil possessed no state secrets, and no influence with the king. His father preceded him in the succession, so it would do no good to discredit his reputation. In short, Kalmeki would gain no advantage by seducing him.

With his tongue, he found Kalmeki's earlobe and licked it. "Do you want to stay?"

Kalmeki pulled back. "I would not refuse, but my absence would be noted."

Zhanil kissed him eagerly. He was not yet ready to give up the promise of that hard body against his, and the feel of the man's erect, uncut cock in his hand. "There are ways around that," he murmured, punctuating his words by slipping his pointed tongue inside Kalmeki's mouth.

"If you can find a way," said Kalmeki, gasping into the kiss, "then I will stay."

* * * *

"Where did you learn to make love," Zhanil asked lazily. "I thought you'd never done it before."

Kalmeki sprawled naked on the bed beside him, and as the sweat began to cool on their bodies, Zhanil drew the coverlet over them. "I did not say I was a virgin. I have been with women."

Once his guest decided to stay, Zhanil did his best to keep his libido in check as he sent for Alassil and calmly informed him that, due to the late hour, Kalmeki would remain for the night. Whether his voice or face betrayed his intentions, he did not know, and the steward gave no indication that anything was amiss. Only Amset hinted at disapproval, his brows wrinkling in a slight frown, yet in the end he, too, went along with the prince's wishes.

Zhanil waited only as long as it took everyone to withdraw and the household to grow silent before creeping down the hall to the guest room, scratching at the door, and, when Kalmeki opened, finishing what they had begun. Later, he recalled those moments as a hot blur in which he and Kalmeki had pulled at each other's clothes, tugging them off and throwing them aside while devouring each other in a frenzy of passionate kisses.

Kalmeki's firmly muscled body pressing against his felt as delicious as Zhanil had imagined it would be. The facial hair that brushed his face and throat as Kalmeki kissed him was more a novelty than an annoyance, and a reminder that tonight the lover in his bed was a man, not a pleasure boy from the royal slave quarters.

"You aren't married," said Zhanil, "and you told me the Turyar don't have prostitutes. The girls don't do it before marriage, do they?"

"They have the right, but most do not," replied Kalmeki. "There are wise women who teach young men how to make love. A man must satisfy his wife, or she may leave him for another, so he must know what to do. It is not much different, making love to a man, as it is a woman."

Whatever arts the wise woman had taught him, Kalmeki knew what to do in bed, and wasted no time in running a hot trail from Zhanil's lips, down his throat, to his nipples. Zhanil writhed under the assault, stifling his groans so as not to wake the household. For the first time, he struggled to give as good as he got, turning their lovemaking into passionate wrestling.

"Are you trying to beat me because you did not yesterday?" asked Kalmeki.

"No, I'm trying to get off." Zhanil cupped his lover's buttocks with both hands, squeezing and pulling him close while silencing his protests with his tongue.

Unwilling to leave it at that, Kalmeki flipped him over on the mattress and, covering Zhanil with his body, ground hard against him. Zhanil maneuvered a hand between their bodies, combing his fingers through the damp curls at the junction of Kalmeki's thighs until he found what he sought.

Sliding up and down, urged on by Kalmeki's moans, he stroked his partner's cock, rubbing against his own. "Sit up on top of me," he said, "and join your hand with mine."

Kalmeki straddled him and, following Zhanil's lead, wrapped his large hand around both their cocks. After this, he needed no instruction, but began to stroke, quickening the pace until both of them were breathing hard and bucking their hips. Strangled groans accompanied their movements.

As he approached orgasm, Zhanil smiled up at Kalmeki. He could waste time wishing that his partner was a woman, or a boy from the slave quarters, but as he eased into the callused grip that squeezed and pumped his cock, it occurred to him that he enjoyed himself so much precisely because Kalmeki was neither of these things. The Turya was an equal, and as a man he just *knew* what to do.

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Zhanil came first, hard and fast onto his belly. Spent, he lay with his eyes closed, relishing the sound of his lover's climax.

"That was good," Kalmeki said afterward. They lay close under the coverlet, lightly touching and kissing. "But we should not do it again. It is dangerous for both of us."

"I know," replied Zhanil. If only things were different, but they were not, and it did no good to wish otherwise.

* * * *

"Are you out of your fucking mind?" hissed Adeja. "Wait, I take that back about the fucking, because we already know about *that* part."

While the underlying advice was sensible, Zhanil found Adeja's tone irritating. He was not about to ask how the man knew about last night's tryst, because by now it was a moot point. "As much as I appreciate your concern—"

"You want me to shut up and mind my own business, is that it? If you had an ounce of sense in that thick head if yours, maybe I would, but instead I find you've been rolling around in bed with that Turya savage. You realize that when people find out about this, they're—"

"They aren't *going* to find out," Zhanil said coldly, "because you aren't *going* to tell them. What I do in my private apartments is my business."

Without waiting for permission, Adeja sat down at the table, in the very seat Kalmeki had occupied last night, and continued, "Nobody cares how many slaves you fuck, or if you like to lick honey off their bellies or watch them being fucked by trained baboons, but this man is an ambassador *and* a Turya. Do you honestly want to risk having the entire kingdom find out that you like sucking his cock?"

Zhanil gritted his teeth against the urge to order him out of the room. "I never went that far with him. We had a bit too much wine last night and things happened, but I *never* sucked his cock."

"If it was simply a matter of being drunk, you'd have jumped on him at dessert and fucked him on the table, not waited until after Alassil found him a room for the night," said Adeja. "Drunkards don't plan ahead like that, and I'm not so old or stupid that I don't know when you're lying to me. You two have been eyeing each other since Meduin, and if your household knows about it, it won't be long before your grandfather finds out."

Zhanil paused at the thought of his grandfather's potential outrage. "It was just a bit of kissing and fondling, nothing more."

"Do you really think that matters?" asked Adeja. "You're more than old enough to start thinking about your reputation, so I suggest you put a little more effort into it. You have no idea how much this can damage you, Zhanil. Just ask your father."

"His enemies slander him with tales that aren't even true."

"Yes, and in case you hadn't realized it, his enemies are also your enemies," said Adeja. "Your father works hard at the image he presents to the world. You don't have the benefit of the priesthood to shield you from scandal: something you might want to keep in mind while you're fucking that Turya."

"His *name* is Kalmeki," Zhanil said sharply.

Adeja ignored him. "The best thing for you to do right now is go back into the army, at least until he leaves. For all you know, he was ordered to seduce you."

"It might surprise you to learn that I'd considered that option," replied Zhanil, "but I fail to see what he'd gain by it. I don't have any influence over the king or any state secrets to betray."

"But you do have a reputation to ruin," said Adeja.

Zhanil shook his head. "So does he. I'd worry about spies and poison and knives in the dark if Kalmeki was from Tajhaan, but it's absurd to think that a Turya warrior would stoop so low as to play the harlot."

Adeja took his time about answering. "Then what reason could he possibly have to go to bed with you?"

"Has it ever occurred to you that maybe there *isn't* an ulterior motive, that it's simply a question of wanting to be friends, or lovers?" asked Zhanil.

"That's ridiculous," said Adeja. "The Turyar are savages."

"The people we saw in Rhodeen seemed content enough to live and marry among them. Perhaps we could take a lesson in tolerance from them and do the same," replied Zhanil.

As usual, his attempt at rational conversation fell on stone ears, and he ended up finishing his breakfast alone. Zhanil still cared enough for Adeja not to dismiss him, but where he once relied on the man's advice, he now found some of it increasingly biased and impractical, relics of an earlier age that viewed the Turyar as nothing more than faceless marauders who sacked towns and slaughtered entire populations down to the livestock.

Twenty years had brought change, and it troubled Zhanil to think that Adeja could not adapt. "No one is asking you to love them," he said, addressing the wall as though the man was still there, "but like it or not, they're here to stay."

The only sensible thing left to do was to accept the Turyar as they were and make peace. Nonetheless, Zhanil dreaded the thought of what his friendship with Kalmeki might cost him.

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Chapter Twelve

"One of my uncles is hosting a party this evening," said Zhanil, "and I want you to come with me."

Kalmeki hesitated, murmuring something about not having been specifically invited by the host. The more time Zhanil spent with him, the more he realized how sensitive the Turyar were about the image they presented beyond their borders. "I do not wish to offend."

"I've already sent a message to Agantine to ask him," replied Zhanil, "and he says you're welcome to come."

Turning his face to the cold wind blowing down from the mountains, Kalmeki shifted in the saddle. With no other pastime, and wishing to counteract any suspicion that might arise from spending too much time alone together indoors, the two men rode together in the hills north of the city, practiced archery, and wrestled on the training sands. When they had enough physical activity, Zhanil took his guest to the various bazaars specializing in leather goods, weapons, and glass, which the Turyar admired but could not produce themselves.

While Kalmeki did not comment on his equestrian skills, which were excellent by Khalgari standards, Zhanil felt selfconscious riding with him. The Turyar were the finest horsemen in the world, and on their first day out together Kalmeki demonstrated how they were the finest archers, too. With the reins wrapped around his waist, using only his muscular legs to grip the horse's flanks, he fired three arrows into a tree stump while simultaneously charging. All three found their mark, but Zhanil was too transfixed by Kalmeki to even notice.

Such a heroic, powerful method of riding, and had it been warm enough to strip to the waist ... Before the thought fully formed, Zhanil banished it, yet it kept returning to torment his libido.

Kalmeki did not hesitate to join him riding, wrestling, or exploring the bazaar, but when it came to socializing with members of the royal court, he balked. "There will be nothing improper at this party?" he asked.

Zhanil smiled. "There'll be some rich food and wine, maybe some dancing women and jugglers, but no courtesans or prostitutes. Agantine is a very respectable man, and besides, my grandfather would have a conniption if anyone in the family misbehaved. I can ask Nesha if he wants to come, if it'll make you feel better." Lakkel had returned to Rhodeen weeks ago to make his report to the *turkan*.

"Nesha prefers to remain at the embassy," said Kalmeki, "and prefers that I remain also."

Sparing a glance over his shoulder at his guard, Zhanil noted with approval that Amset and Amhir, the former's son, stayed discreetly out of earshot. "He knows nothing improper is going on."

Kalmeki nodded, but did not look pleased. "He knows nothing, yes. As for the rest, it is certainly improper."

"You made a joke and you aren't even laughing?" Zhanil gave his reins a twitch, turning his horse on the path. "We

should head back now. There's just enough time to get something to eat and rest before tonight."

Upon returning to the city, they ate in the bazaar, then parted ways for the rest of the afternoon. After their night together, both had spent the next three weeks striving to create an image of close, platonic friendship, yet Zhanil was certain someone would eventually notice the lingering glances that passed between them, or that others could read the salacious thoughts racing through his head whenever he was with Kalmeki.

They might steal a kiss or caress in the privacy of the baths, or in a dark corner of Zhanil's apartments, but they could never again risk the passionate lovemaking they had enjoyed that one night.

Whatever they noticed or thought, the servants gave no sign. Adeja, however, was another matter. Within a day, it was clear he had said something to Sephil, for when his father drew him aside and urged him to be cautious, Zhanil did not need to ask for clarification.

"Perhaps at nineteen you do not think you need advice," said Sephil, "but you will listen. I am not going to ask what you and Kalmeki have been doing. I simply want you to know that I understand more than you think, and I do not want you to learn too late how much harm a scandal can cause you."

Zhanil listened, yet was left wondering what personal experience his father might have had to be able to make such a claim. Slanders of sexual perversion leveled at Sephil did not touch his reputation, as no one, including his son, gave them any credence. A Crown of Stars by L. E. Bryce

Could it be that he is like Kalmeki? Zhanil banished that thought as quickly as it formed. His father occasionally took male lovers from among the royal pleasure slaves because his mother, like many of the other royal wives, would not tolerate female concubines who might produce illegitimate offspring.

The last thing Zhanil needed was a lecture, and was grateful that his father did not bear down upon him as Adeja did. Both he and Kalmeki understood the potential danger, discussing it in private on more than one occasion. The wisest course, they agreed, would be to stop meeting altogether, but neither one was ready to go quite that far. There was no need to sacrifice friendship along with carnal desire.

Had Kalmeki, and not Lakkel, been the one chosen to return to Rhodeen, it would have been perfect. On the other hand, had Zhanil received his long-awaited post that, too, would have helped. Not for a moment did he believe that his grandfather did not know what was going on. Ampheres, however, gave no hint, and did not even respond to Zhanil's request for an interview.

Why must he be so difficult? Zhanil had given up trying to read his grandfather, and certainly knew better than to expect any favors from him.

His desire cared nothing for propriety. Meditation did not help, especially when he lacked his father's spiritual outlook, and his body would only obey him for so long. On those nights when the hour was too late to send for a slave, or now, in the afternoon when he was supposed to be resting for Agantine's party, Zhanil lay naked on his bed, stroking his cock while imagining that it was Kalmeki's hands touching him. Sometimes he imagined his lover's cock bobbing in front of him, where he could rub it and draw back the foreskin to expose the pink tip while the man above him groaned. Only habit had kept him from licking it in reality, yet now, had Kalmeki been with him at this moment, Zhanil would have done just that.

Bringing himself to a sticky climax, he washed, dozed for an hour, then left the bed to dress and prepare. Alassil had already laid out garments, and stayed to help with the fastenings even as he inquired about later arrangements.

"Do you want the guest rooms ready, sir?"

Through the mirror, Zhanil observed his expression, but the steward gave nothing away. "If the hour is too late, then I may ask Kalmeki to stay the night."

Kalmeki arrived at sunset, wearing the same embroidered tunic he had worn three weeks earlier. While admiring the handsome figure his friend presented, Zhanil wondered if Kalmeki owned only the one formal garment, and if it would be considered an insult to offer him a second.

"Should I have brought a gift?" asked Kalmeki. "I keep thinking that I will offend your uncle by coming emptyhanded."

"If you mean food," said Zhanil, "then Agantine will have plenty to eat and drink. Host-gifts aren't expected among the nobility, and if you offer them the other guests might consider you a bit rustic."

Kalmeki smiled at Alassil, who had entered the sitting room behind Zhanil. "What does that mean, rustic?" "It means that you're not from the city and lack sophistication," explained Zhanil. "It isn't a compliment. Of course, you know *I* don't think you're rustic. It's just that Agantine doesn't know you or any other Turyar, and he doesn't understand your customs."

Gazing down at his clothes, Kalmeki shook his head, suddenly self-conscious of the image he presented. "Perhaps I—"

"You look just fine," insisted Zhanil. "This is a small, private party, not a state banquet. Agantine's guests will be scholars and merchants who will probably be very interested in talking to you. There might even be a few priests."

"Are you certain I should come?" asked Kalmeki.

Zhanil refused to let him protest, marching him out the door when he would have done so. "You and I are going to have a good time, and that's the end of it."

The night was bitterly cold, promising morning frost and perhaps rain, yet that did not stop the two men from riding the distance from the palace to Agantine's house a mile away. Because the streets in the upper city were well-lit, there was no need to hire torchbearers, and Kalmeki eschewed the suggestion of an armed guard with a hearty laugh, leaving no room for an escort save Nahar.

By royal standards, Agantine dwelt in a modest house shaded by lush private gardens which often served as a setting for summer entertainments. Zhanil smothered a grin when Kalmeki gaped at the lantern-lit portico and atrium with its pastoral murals. By comparison, the Turya embassy was an unadorned warren of rooms and passages brightened only by felt and wool tapestries depicting horses, abstract figures, and even serpents in intertwining patterns.

"It gets better," Zhanil murmured in his ear.

"I am staring, yes?"

Agantine, a childless widower of fifty-six, cheerfully welcomed them in a room just off the atrium. "Shed those fur cloaks and come stand by the fire," he said. "Have some mulled wine and mingle." Glancing over at Kalmeki, he smiled. "My nephew told me he had a Turya friend. It is a pleasure to have you here."

When Agantine promised a leisurely evening of good food and conversation, he delivered. Kalmeki sampled the wine, smiled at the guests who greeted him, and after a while, realizing there would be no hostilities, began to relax. As the only Turya present, he attracted attention, mostly in the form of queries about trade and the blending of native and imported customs in Rhodeen.

"It is fortunate the silk trade has not been disrupted," said one man, a dye merchant. "I assume the Turyar have taken a liking to the fabric?"

With some amusement, Zhanil observed how the guests avoided mentioning the invasion, either by using euphemisms or pretending that it had not occurred at all. From the looks Kalmeki gave him, he saw the other man had also noticed.

"Our women enjoy sewing with silk," replied Kalmeki, "but we do not wear it. It is too flimsy a material for us."

As the dining room grew steadily warmer, Zhanil loosened his collar and wished that his uncle would open one of the windows to let in a little air. Meanwhile, the wine flowed, a different vintage accompanying each course. Zhanil found himself glancing over at his friend to make certain he did not drink too much, yet saw that Kalmeki indulged sparingly, and seemed to tolerate well what alcohol he did consume.

Jugglers came out, performing in the space before the main table. Dessert brought male and female acrobats. As Kalmeki watched them, Zhanil could not help but notice how his gaze followed the men far more often than the women. Leaning over, he whispered, "Do you have tumblers in your land?"

"We have riders who can stand or hang from the saddle," replied Kalmeki, "but this is different. You said it would be modest."

Zhanil did not need to hear the catch in his voice to know how affected Kalmeki was by the lithe male bodies contorting before him; the clenched fist resting against his thigh was eloquent enough. "This *is* considered modest," Zhanil whispered back.

"They are half-naked."

"Because it's warm in here and their clothing would get in the way," replied Zhanil. "You can't really see anything, you know."

Damp mist blanketed the streets when they finally took their leave. Zhanil offered to escort Kalmeki back to the Turya embassy, but when the man refused on account of the late hour, he insisted. "It's either this or you stay the night in my apartments."

"That would not be wise," said Kalmeki. "I assure you, I can find my own way back."

"I know you can," replied Zhanil, "but you never know what thieves or cutthroats are hiding in the dark. Let's not argue about this. The palace is much closer, and I've already had Alassil prepare a room for you. It's been a long evening, we're both tired, and nothing is going to happen."

Once Kalmeki agreed to accompany him home, Zhanil found it surprisingly easy to keep his word. After making certain that his guest had all he required, he let his groom help him undress and prepare for bed. That night, he slept soundly, giving no thought to the man down the hall except to hope that he was comfortable.

The thump of a heavy object being set atop the linen chest at the foot of his bed woke him from a pleasant dream. Irritated, Zhanil stirred and opened his eyes. "Do you have to do that now, Argas?"

"I am sorry, sir," said the groom, "but Alassil says you cannot stay in bed. Your guest is already up and breakfast will be served shortly. Camo is bringing the water and towels. I will put away your jewels from last night."

Zhanil yawned, giving no attention to the key in the young man's hand; the servants never opened his jewel casket outside his presence. Alassil need not have bothered with such formalities, as Zhanil possessed little worth stealing.

Argas turned the key, raised the lid, and flinched back. Crying out, he dropped to the floor, wide-eyed and twitching. The chest tumbled to the carpet, freeing a black object that quickly uncoiled and darted out. Zhanil heard a soft hiss, and the rasp of dry scales sliding against each other. A Crown of Stars by L. E. Bryce

There was no time for thought. Still in his sleeping trousers, Zhanil scrambled from the mattress onto a nearby chair, and from there spent half a minute judging the distance from the chair to the sideboard before attempting it.

While the sideboard was sturdy enough to bear his weight, it was uncomfortably narrow. Zhanil crouched down and, with a better view of the floor, assessed the situation. Argas, still twitching, was either dead or near death, sprawled amid the spilled rings and chains. At his feet coiled the snake, its flattened, wedge-shaped head and black coloring marking it out as a *daku*, the deadliest reptile known to man.

Rescue lay within reach. Zhanil had only to call out, but mixed with his terror was the knowledge that whoever opened the door would be struck by what was not only a lightning-fast predator, but also an extremely aggressive one that could rear up and strike a grown man in the face. It was all he could do to stay perfectly still and hope not to attract the snake's attention.

As the latch began to turn, he shouted, "No! Stay out, there's danger!" It might have been Alassil at the door, but was probably Camo, the servant bringing his hot water and towels.

Multiple footfalls thudded through the corridor, stopping at the door. Zhanil heard Amset's voice behind the heavy oak. "Are you all right?"

"For the moment," Zhanil called out shakily. "There's a snake by the door, a *daku*. It'll strike the second you try to come in."

"Are you sure it's a daku?"

"Yes, I'm sure. Argas is dead."

"All right," said Amset. "Where are you?"

"I'm on the sideboard near the window," answered Zhanil. "I can't get out that way, and I don't have any weapons with me."

"No, you don't want to tangle with that snake unless you're in full armor," said Amset. Behind the door, Zhanil heard muffled argument, presumably as the people outside were trying to decide what to do.

A moment later, Amset spoke again, "There's a tapestry above you, isn't there?"

Zhanil felt the rough, heavy weave brush against his right shoulder. "Yes, but why?"

"Do you think you can get it down?"

Of all the things Amset could ask him, why this? "If I move, it'll see me and—"

"Calm down, Zhanil. You have to stay calm and move very slowly," said Amset. "Get the hanging off its rods and in front of you, but keep it high. And yes, the snake will come toward you once you've done it, but that's what you want."

"Are you *trying* to get me killed?" Even though he knew snakes had no ears, Zhanil was reluctant to speak too loudly or make any other noise.

"We're *trying* to save your life, boy," barked Adeja. "Now do as Amset tells you."

"Once you have the tapestry," continued Amset, "carefully lower it and drop it onto the snake once it gets close enough. You've got to make sure you completely cover it, because you have only one chance. As soon as you do that, get away and let us do the rest."

Had he a choice, Zhanil would have rather gone out the window, but while he was willing to shatter the glass with his own hand if necessary, from there it was three stories to the courtyard below. Torn sheets tied together would have made a serviceable rope, yet there was no time, and his movements would have attracted the snake's attention.

Rising from his crouch, scarcely daring to breathe, Zhanil inched toward the brass rods holding the tapestry in place. His muscles strained, and the heavy hanging wobbled in his grip, threatening to drop or tilt him off-balance. Fear lent him strength he otherwise would have lacked, allowing him to maneuver the tapestry into position.

He drew a sharp breath as he saw the snake whip around and dart toward him, sliding over the corpse's legs with a papery rasp. The sight was enough to make even the bravest man lose his nerve, and Zhanil's instincts screamed at him to run, but he maintained his hold on the tapestry, every sinew straining to keep it aloft.

At the foot of the sideboard, the snake coiled and, hissing, started to rear. Zhanil dropped the tapestry, enveloping the snake before crawling on hands and knees to the far end of the sideboard, upsetting an urn of flowers and an alabaster lamp. Gulping for air, trying hard to remain calm, failing, he bolted for the door and flung it open.

Amset surged past him, followed by Adeja bearing a stout club and Kalmeki with his bow strung and poised to fire. Zhanil watched from the doorway, ignoring Alassil's queries and steadying hand, as the two men pummeled the writhing lump under the tapestry. After several moments, when they noticed it was no longer moving, they hung back.

Nahar appeared at the door with a pike, which Adeja seized from him. "Step away," he told Amset. "I'm pulling the cloth back."

As Kalmeki edged into the room, bowstring drawn, Adeja turned on him. "It's already dead."

"Perhaps," said Kalmeki, sighting along the arrow shaft, "or perhaps not. We will make certain."

Using the tip of the pike, Adeja carefully raised the edge of the tapestry, revealing a misshapen form that continued to writhe even when Kalmeki's arrow pinned it to the floor. "It'll stop in a moment," he said, handing the pike back to Nahar. With his foot, he prodded Argas, then stooped to examine the jewel casket. "Stuffing a *daku* in here isn't an easy job."

"Whoever did it used this." Amset stooped, retrieved a canvas bag, and handed it to Adeja.

Zhanil could not bear to listen to anymore. Stumbling barefoot out into the sitting room, warily scanning the floor for more serpents, he tried to calm his nerves. When he held up his hand, he saw how violently he was shaking. He wanted to vomit, to run, to scream. Seeing Argas carried out, wrapped in a bed sheet, did not help, even when Alassil assured him that he would inform the young man's family and see to his burial.

"I should talk to them," said Zhanil.

"Right now you should drink this and calm down." Amset handed him a glass of golden liquid. "It's brandy, so sip it slowly."

Zhanil let Amset hold the glass for him until he felt steady enough to take it himself. "Who did this?" he asked. "That box was locked. Only Alassil has the key."

"That's a good question." Focusing a predatory look on the steward, Adeja entered the room. Behind him, Nahar carried out the canvas bag containing the dead snake. "I'd like to hear the answer."

Alassil held up his hands. "I know what you are thinking, Adeja, but I do not keep the key on my person. I lock it up when not in use."

Zhanil took another sip of brandy. The alcohol burned a welcome trail through his belly. "Someone placed that snake there during the night because it wasn't there yesterday when I was getting dressed for Agantine's party. I keep the box in my study."

"Which is right next to the steward's office," finished Adeja. Drawing his knife, he took a step forward.

"Stop that!" Zhanil said sharply. "You can't just interrogate him like that."

"He's right, Adeja," added Amset. "If you want to question Alassil, you have to do it legally. He has no reason to try to kill the prince, and besides, he would have had to handle the snake to get it into the chest. A snake that deadly is a handful and maneuvering it into a space like that takes experience." Adeja, however, did not take his eyes off the steward. "That doesn't mean he didn't let someone else in to do it for him."

"This is ridiculous," said Zhanil. "Adeja, we could spend all morning doing this. Seal off the household and make sure no one leaves. Count the servants and guards to be certain. We'll let the king's men question everybody. Kalmeki, I'm sorry, but you'll have to stay a while longer."

Kalmeki sat down beside him, perhaps a little closer than he should have, but at that moment Zhanil felt ready to throw his arms around the man. He took another sip of brandy. "I do not mind. It is not our way to leave when a friend is in trouble."

"A friend," snorted Adeja. "For all we know, *you* put the snake there."

Zhanil nearly choked on his brandy. Beside him, Kalmeki stiffened. "You insult me," he said. "If I wished the prince dead, he would be dead, but my people do not kill like this."

"Is that why your people threw *daku* over the walls at Mekesh? For someone who claims their people kill openly, the Turyar certainly know how to handle snakes and scorpions."

"I was a boy when Mekesh was taken," replied Kalmeki. "I was not there."

"But I was."

Kalmeki narrowed his eyes. "Now who is the liar? It is known that no one escaped Mekesh."

"Stop arguing, both of you," snapped Zhanil. Whenever he was angry, Adeja saw shadows everywhere, and worse, either infected or irritated everyone else with his paranoia. "Amset

has already begun gathering the servants. Go help him, and try not to make any accusations until we know more."

* * * *

The moment Sephil heard a deadly snake had been loosed in his son's chamber, instinct told him to go straightaway to his son and see with his own eyes that Zhanil was safe. Instead, relying on Adeja's assurances, and grateful that his wife was not present, he forced himself to sit and listen.

After a while, Sephil realized he was paying more attention to Adeja's tone of voice than his actual words. It did not surprise him that Adeja was angry, only that it irritated him. The casual manner in which Adeja eliminated threats and bullied the household staff had never agreed with him, but Sephil had tolerated these infractions because it seemed that no one else could keep Zhanil safe. However, as the years passed and his son grew to maturity, Sephil saw that Amset and Nahar were calmer, more disciplined, and just as competent as Adeja, who had become every inch the liability Ketalya and the king had warned against so many years ago.

More than anything, Sephil wished it could be otherwise. From the beginning, he had hoped Adeja would see the advantage in enlisting in the Khalgari army and building a legitimate career, but it had not been so. Adeja was stubborn, restless, and overly vigilant, qualities admirably suited to the guardian of a small child under threat, yet troublesome now.

Whether it was middle age, his injured leg, or the knowledge that Zhanil was an adult who might no longer need him, Adeja lashed out, perceiving threats in every corner of the prince's household, from the steward to the servants to the young Turya ambassador whom Zhanil had befriended.

"Why do you suspect Alassil?" asked Sephil. "You screened him yourself."

"He keeps the keys to the jewel casket," replied Adeja. "The person who placed the snake in there would've had to go through him."

Sephil knew that stewards, including his own, did not always keep the household keys on their person. "Alassil has a room separate from Zhanil's apartments. If he left the keys, they could have been stolen during the night without his knowledge. I trust you are letting the king's officials do their work and question everyone?"

Adeja nodded, but from his scowl it was plain that the situation did not suit him. "If they want results, they need to be more aggressive in their questioning."

That Adeja preferred violence as the first option came as no surprise, and Sephil could only wonder what he might have done before the authorities became involved. "We have been through this before, and you know that interrogation by torture is illegal. I sincerely hope you did not touch Alassil."

"No, I didn't touch him, or the Turya," replied Adeja. "You did not accuse Kalmeki, did you?"

"The Turyar have good reason to want—"

"Adeja, that man is an *ambassador*." Sephil wanted to groan, to put his face in his hands, to take Adeja by the shoulders and shake him for being so colossally thick-headed. "We have narrowly avoided one diplomatic incident with the Turyar, and now you are halfway to causing another."

Diplomacy was an art for which Adeja had always lacked the necessary tact. On numerous occasions, both Sephil and his son tried to explain that, regardless of personal feelings, the Turya presence in Rhodeen could not be ignored or slighted. While Sephil understood and even shared some of his mistrust, Adeja could not seem to set his prejudices aside long enough to perform his duties.

He is a liability. Once, he was the only one whom I could trust, but now I dread the thought of what he might do or say. Sephil hated the changes time and Adeja's own inflexibility had wrought, and felt ill at the prospect of having to dismiss the man from his service. I cannot just throw him out onto the street. I cannot do that to him, or Lahis.

No, he serves my son, and it is Zhanil's responsibility now. Nonetheless, it did not relieve Sephil's guilt. After so many years, he felt an obligation to look after Adeja and return the loyalty and rough affection the man had shown him, but he now feared the possibility that whatever help he could give would not be enough.

* * * *

Hours spent trying to maintain a brave façade took their toll. By sunset, Zhanil could take no more. Slumping onto a couch by the fire, he curled into a little ball and buried his head in his hands.

The king's investigators had left, taking with them the jewel casket, dead snake, and several members of the household for further questioning. Some semblance of calm had returned, but not enough to reassure Zhanil. Adeja crouched down beside him. "Maybe you should have gone with your parents, just for tonight."

Zhanil shook his head. After all the time he had spent trying to convince them he was all right, it would not do to break down in front of his mother and father like small child; it had been all he could do to stop shaking when they held him. "No, but I don't want to sleep in my room, either."

"Would you prefer one of the guest rooms, perhaps?" suggested Alassil. Even though the investigators had exonerated the steward, Alassil and Adeja continued to dance knives around each other until Zhanil wanted to yell at them both.

"I don't think so." Zhanil found the prospect of staying anywhere in his apartments unappealing. Amset, Nahar, and Amhir had spent the entire day searching every corner and chest, finding nothing, but Zhanil could not shed the irrational belief that another snake coiled in wait under his bed, or in the privy. He wondered when he would ever feel secure again.

Had it been earlier, he might have sent a message to Agantine asking to stay the night, but to make the request on such short notice was rude.

Closing his eyes, Zhanil tried to think past the tension in the room. A firm hand touched his shoulder. "If you wish to stay in our embassy, you will find it perfectly safe," said Kalmeki. "All of our servants there are Turya, and they can be trusted."

"Absolutely not," growled Adeja.

However Adeja tried to bait him, Kalmeki refused to take insult. "You are a fool to say no so quickly. The prince would be our guest, and among our people a guest cannot be harmed or allowed to come to harm."

"We have similar laws in Tajhaan," said Adeja, "but they aren't always observed."

"Then your problem is not the law, but your people."

Zhanil wearily sat up. "If I can sleep in quiet, without having to be afraid of finding a snake or some other horror in my bed, then the Turya embassy it is."

Adeja relented, but his disapproval lingered. "At least take a guard."

"If Amset wishes to come," said Kalmeki, glaring pointedly at Adeja, "he is welcome but he will have to give up his weapons at the door. It is our custom."

Amset nodded. "Yes, I remember."

Whatever protests Nesha might have made, they died on his lips the moment Kalmeki explained the situation.

"Enemies should strike openly, not skulking about in shadows cloaked with dishonor," he said, speaking in Rhodeen. "This is a most unusual situation, but we will oblige. You may have Lakkel's chamber."

"I don't wish to impose," said Zhanil. "Tomorrow I'll make other arrangements."

Kalmeki reassured him. "It was I who invited you, so you are not imposing. You must rest and eat something, and put your mind at ease. You are perfectly safe here."

Throughout the day, others had offered similar assurances. Only now, hearing the words from Kalmeki, could Zhanil

begin to believe them. He bathed, changed into the clothes he had brought, and shared supper with the two ambassadors, listening in silence as Kalmeki related the day's events. In the middle of the conversation, Nesha invited Amset to the table. "You are also a guest," he said.

Where Adeja would have protested, Amset took his cue from the embassy's customs and sat down across from Zhanil. "So I can still watch your back," he replied.

After supper, Kalmeki escorted Zhanil to his room, with Amset following at a discreet distance. Nesha had already explained in firm tones that, while Amset had been allowed to accompany Zhanil, it was not necessary to post a sentry in a secure household. Amset accepted a room next door, after thoroughly searching Zhanil's chamber for any hidden threats.

Zhanil knew he and Kalmeki lingered too long in the doorway. Polite words trailed into a silence that normally would have led to kisses or other intimacies, but they were not alone or in a place where such behavior, had it been noticed, would have been tolerated.

Glancing anxiously over his shoulder, Zhanil saw Amset frowning at him. "We're just talking."

"Just be careful what you do when you're finished talking, Zhanil." Nodding at Kalmeki, Amset went into his room and closed the door.

"I should go," said Kalmeki.

"I shouldn't keep you," replied Zhanil. "You've done more than enough for me today. Truly, I don't know what else to say but thank you." Kalmeki nodded, then drew forth a knife in an elaborate leather sheath. "I should not offer you this, for you are in no danger here, but I think perhaps you would sleep better having this with you."

I would feel better if you stayed. Taking the knife from him, Zhanil placed a hand on Kalmeki's arm. "Thank you. I know this is against custom."

Kalmeki mirrored the gesture, sliding his hand up Zhanil's arm to grasp his shoulder. "Do you wish me to come inside? It cannot be for long, you understand, only to make certain you have all you need."

A wiser man would have declined, but Zhanil knew that in this case he was neither wise nor able to resist such an offer. Like a frightened child, he wanted to be held close, kissed and caressed into forgetfulness. If Kalmeki was willing to offer him such solace, he would not refuse.

Desire did not banish entirely caution. As Kalmeki's mouth found the pulse in his neck, running questing fingers under his tunic and up his bare chest to tease his nipples, Zhanil choked back the moan that would have alerted Amset or a passing servant. "It's a good thing you aren't loud when you make love," he whispered, nipping Kalmeki's earlobe. "This would have been impossible."

Kalmeki only pulled him closer. "Do not think that I am not tempted."

Between their whispers, an eavesdropper would have heard only ragged breaths between their kisses, and the occasional creak of the mattress. Lying side by side, they touched each other, caressing hard muscles and erect nipples, letting lips and tongues follow their hands.

Zhanil trailed his fingers down the trail of golden hair leading to Kalmeki's groin, grasping the cock firmly in one hand and stroking up and down to draw back the foreskin, all while Kalmeki gritted his teeth against crying out. On an impulse, he gave in to the previous day's fantasy and bent to lick the crown.

"You are cruel," breathed Kalmeki.

Crawling up his body, Zhanil whispered in his ear. "You can have your revenge anytime you want."

Five minutes later, with Kalmeki lying between his legs, licking the underside of his cock, Zhanil realized it would have been better not to have spoken. Biting his lip, he wanted nothing more than to be able to moan, to cry out and ease the pleasure made all the more intense by his enforced silence. When he came, spilling across his belly, he gasped and shuddered, shoving a fist into his mouth to stifle his groan.

Even as his cock went limp, he felt a warm tongue lap his stomach, and then Kalmeki was kissing him. It was not the first time Zhanil had tasted his own seed, but to share it with a lover, mingling it with the salt and heat of someone else's mouth, was almost enough to make him hard again.

Fingers closed around his wrist, pushing his hand down. Still kissing Kalmeki, swallowing his gasps and little sounds of desire, Zhanil returned the favor, stroking the cock pressed against his thigh, increasing the tempo until Kalmeki stiffened and trembled in release. Afterward, they lay close in the diminishing lamplight. Though an ambassador's bedchamber, the room was spare and small, and not very warm. The bed had not been designed with lovemaking in mind, and only after their passion was spent did Zhanil realize how cramped he and Kalmeki were.

Kalmeki rose long enough to bring back a damp cloth to wipe away their spilled seed. "I will take the cloth with me when I go," he said.

Zhanil smiled drowsily. "I hope the walls are solid."

"The servants do not come this way once everyone has gone to bed, and Nesha does not hear so well. I might want you, but I am not so stupid to risk this among my own people if I did not think it would go unnoticed," replied Kalmeki. "Still, I cannot stay much longer."

"There is never enough time, is there?"

"I have learned to be satisfied with what little there is." Kalmeki smiled wistfully. "It is better than being alone."

Zhanil felt his fingers trace the sensitive scar on his shoulder. Wincing, he explained, "It's fully healed, but sometimes it gets tender."

"You were very fortunate," said Kalmeki. Turning, he displayed his own scars, including a long, jagged one running along the back of his thigh. "This happened when I was thrown from a horse as a boy. I caught my foot in the reins and was dragged across rough ground until I remembered the word to make the horse stop."

Zhanil alternated between sympathy and admiration, both for the boy's courage and the man's physique and wellrounded ass, perfectly suited for a thrusting cock. "Does it pain you?" he asked.

"Not anymore," said Kalmeki. "Such injuries are common. One learns to ignore the discomfort."

"If someone asks about tonight, what will you tell them?"

"I will say that you were uneasy and I sat beside your bed until you fell asleep."

"Wouldn't that be a lie?" asked Zhanil.

Smiling, Kalmeki reached for his discarded tunic and pulled it over his head. "Not if I actually do it."

* * * *

"Fortunately for you," said Ampheres, "Lord Kalmeki will be returning to Rhodeen in the spring. Meanwhile, you will be reporting for duty at Tacumé in Mettos. This is a cavalry unit, but the discipline is the same: hard and plenty of it. You will stay there until further notice."

Two days after the attempt on his life, Zhanil received a summons from the king. His grandfather said little about the incident beyond expressing relief that he was unharmed, but wasted no time in reprimanding him for his behavior. "Do not think I have not noticed your dalliance with the Turya ambassador. And if I have noticed, you may be certain that others have done so as well."

Zhanil waited for the inevitable slap in the face. Ampheres, however, had other ideas, involving a worn leather belt he took from a cabinet. "You are not too young for this, boy, and the pain in your backside might discourage you from behaving like a dog in heat." "I have tried to be discreet," said Zhanil.

"Yes, that you have," admitted Ampheres. "Your father tells me you have had enough presence of mind not to get on your knees and take this man like a common prostitute. Nevertheless, even if you do not care about your own reputation, you should consider Kalmeki's. His people will deal harshly with him should they learn of this indiscretion."

"I know," replied Zhanil, "and so does he."

"That you know is not enough. Sit down, boy." Still holding the strap, Ampheres gestured to the chair across from him. "So you are infatuated with him, is that it? Given your taste for all things Turya, I am not surprised, but as he is neither a woman nor a bed slave, this cannot continue. If I could send Kalmeki away without causing offense or stirring suspicion, I would. Since I have no control over him, I must see to it that you are made to understand our position on this matter."

"How long have you known about this, sir?"

"Far longer than you think," replied Ampheres.

Zhanil stared at the strap hanging in his grandfather's hand. Once or twice as an unruly child, he had felt the sting of that well-worn leather, and had no doubt that all of his uncles and male cousins had suffered it as well. "I requested an audience with you weeks ago. You could have said something to me then."

"Do you think I have unlimited leisure to attend to the whims of undisciplined boys? At nineteen, I expect you are capable of exercising sufficient self-control that I should not *have* to talk to you."

"I am not a boy, sir."

"When you behave like a man," said Ampheres, "then I will treat you like one. For now, you are fortunate I do not tan your backside purple."

Despite the very real threat, Zhanil found the courage to speak. "It was not a whim, sir. As a soldier, I should have been posted at the end of summer. Had I gone straight to Mettos after meeting the Turya ambassadors, this entire incident might have been avoided."

Unfurling the belt, Ampheres angrily snapped it against the corner of his desk, making Zhanil flinch. "Do not attempt to shift the blame for your actions onto me."

"I am not the only one at fault," replied Zhanil. "You wanted me in the army to keep me out of trouble, yet when I should have been posted, I was not. You knew about the situation, yet said nothing. Circumstances drew Kalmeki and me together, and we have managed the best we can."

"That you and he have had an affair is the point, not how many times you have bedded each other," said Ampheres. Fingering the strap, running the fraying length between his hands, he paused. "From now until Kalmeki leaves, you will not see each other. To ensure this, you will spend the next three weeks confined to the sanctuary of Abh. You will wear a novice's robes and spend your time meditating and tending to worshippers under the high priest's care. You will receive no visitors and your guards may not accompany you."

While the sanctuary was no longer the hateful place it had seemed during his childhood, Zhanil dreaded the prospect of having to play the part of a priest when he lacked the vocation. "Are you sure that is wise, considering there has just been an attempt on my life?" he asked. "Whoever tried to kill me before might try again."

Ampheres nodded. "You are far safer in the sanctuary than you are in your own household," he replied. "Winter is no time to send you to Mettos, or else I would have already done so. We will put it about that you are spending time in contemplation and prayer after your recent brush with assassins. It would not hurt you to do precisely those things."

"I will go into the sanctuary as you command," said Zhanil, "but only because I have no other choice. I make a very poor priest."

"Experience and time will teach you the value of meditation," replied Ampheres. "If anything, three weeks living an ascetic life will curb your libido." Rolling up the strap, ignoring the bits of ancient leather that flaked off onto his lap, he set it on the desk. "You can resent this as much as you like, boy, but once this business is finished you will see that it is for the best."

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Part Three

Closer Than Lovers

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Chapter Thirteen

Absolutely not.

In the last three days, Zhanil had heard those two words more times than he cared to count, until he had to shut them out. For once, his grandfather made his will known, yet even then Zhanil did not know what to think.

"This may not seem like a wise course of action," said Ampheres, "but I have weighed the matter and decided that you should go. Arzhati gives his assurances that you will be perfectly safe, and he knows, as I do, that it would utterly foolish for him not to keep his word." In fact, the invitation had been worded in such terms that implied a refusal was unacceptable. "This is an opportunity for us to strengthen our ties with the Turyar and present a united front against our enemies in Tajhaan. I expect that you will do us credit abroad."

I am going to Rhodeen, openly and by invitation. It was what Zhanil had wanted from the beginning, to see his father's homeland with his own eyes, but his excitement was watered with equal parts apprehension. Although his father had once told him that Arzhati wanted to reconcile with his wife's kinsman and establish good relations with his neighbors, Zhanil could not fathom why he would extend an invitation to a teenage prince he did not quite trust.

Naturally, his parents opposed the idea, his father even more than his mother. "This is foolish," said Sephil. "Why your grandfather is allowing you to go, I do not know." Ketalya agreed with him. "He has no thought at all for your safety."

Right away, the Turya ambassadors took pains to reassure them. "This is a great honor," said Lakkel. "The *turkan* much desires to meet his wife's kinsmen, and as he respects Prince Sephil's desire to remain in Khalgar, he invites Prince Zhanil in his father's place. I assure you, the prince will be completely safe. No one would dare harm a hearth-guest of the *turkan*."

Kalmeki nodded agreement. "I will accompany the prince to Rhodeen, and bring him back safely."

Only now, after a separation of ten weeks, was Zhanil able to see his lover, and then only among others. They were never alone, and when they spoke to each other it was always with the utmost formality. Such proximity and lack of acknowledgement stung enough that Zhanil began to wish one of the other ambassadors would accompany him instead.

I understand why he does it, and if I were wiser I would welcome it and do likewise. In private, he felt sullen, wanting to refuse the invitation altogether, to lash out and banish Kalmeki from both his thoughts and his presence. How can Grandfather even think to let him come with me? It should be Lakkel, or even Nesha.

As senior ambassador to Khalgar, Nesha would stay in Bhellin, and Lakkel had just returned from Rhodeen, leaving the younger Kalmeki to make the trip. Zhanil knew his grandfather did not trust him enough or his feelings for Kalmeki to let him go alone. For company, he would have his uncle Agantine, and would enter Rhodeen as a junior member of the Khalgari royal family. There would be no mention of his paternal lineage unless Arzhati broached the subject, and even then, Agantine would answer for him.

Because the trip was an official embassy from Khalgar, strict etiquette had to be observed, including the presentation of gifts. Zhanil preferred to leave the matter to others, but his parents and uncle insisted he attend meetings with the viziers and Turya ambassadors.

"It may be unpleasant, lad," said Agantine, "but a prince has to learn these things at some point, even if he never goes abroad. You might as well do it now."

While the ambassadors explained which gifts were appropriate, the viziers responsible for procuring the items took notes. "The *turkan* does not drink wine," said Lakkel, "but it is known that Khalgar produces the best vintages, so when you are invited to dine you must bring samples of this. Guests bring food and drink as gifts to Turya feasts."

"It seems a rather quaint custom," commented Sephil.

Zhanil smiled as he remembered Kalmeki's offer to bring an entire roast goat from the embassy.

"Khalgar is also known for its carpets," continued Lakkel, "so you should offer this to the *turkan* as well. It is a very appropriate gift, for in our lands we cover our floors with many layers of carpet. For his lady, you should offer jewelry, but the gift should come from the lady Ketalya. A Turya woman should not receive jewels from a man who is not her kin unless he means to marry her."

"Should we offer horses to the *turkan*?" asked Zhanil.

Kalmeki frowned. "A man offers horses when he wishes to marry a woman, or if he intends to atone for an insult. Horses are not appropriate, and you do not wish to offer weapons, either. A father gives these to his sons, or a *turkan* to his warriors."

"So this would be interpreted as a warlike gesture?" asked Agantine. As Zhanil now learned, he was fluent in Rhodeen and did not need a translator to speak to the ambassadors.

"Perhaps," replied Nesha. "Now if your king says to the *turkan*: let us be brothers and allies against Tajhaan, then they may exchange weapons. However, that has not yet come to pass."

"Is Arzhati interested in such an alliance?"

"That we cannot say," replied Lakkel. "The *turkan* has not made his mind known on this matter."

Though neither his voice nor manner betrayed any subterfuge, Lakkel seemed to know more than he said. *Then why doesn't he just come out and say so?* thought Zhanil. *It wouldn't come as a surprise to anyone, and I doubt Grandfather would object*.

With so many bodies crammed into the sitting room, a servant had opened a window to let in some air. Zhanil, seated with his uncle at the back of the room, could feel the cool spring breeze on his face and smell the grass in the garden just below. After the long winter, spent confined to the sanctuary of Abh and then to his bed after catching a fever from one of the worshippers, he longed to be outside, riding and hunting, not trapped indoors making tedious arrangements.

Traveling to Rhodeen meant postponing his military appointment to Mettos. In spite of his earlier determination to see Rhodeen, or perhaps because of it, Zhanil would have preferred returning to the army to making this journey. At least he would have known what to expect, and he would not have had to deal with Kalmeki.

Amset would accompany him as his sole bodyguard. Nahar would remain behind with Amhir, and Adeja was unavailable. During his illness, Zhanil learned that Adeja had inexplicably received an assignment escorting army mail and supply posts to Sufhír and Medás. That he could do so without formally enlisting remained a mystery, one in which Zhanil sensed his grandfather's hand.

It saves me the trouble of having to dismiss him. Zhanil concentrated on recovering, while his father brought news of the investigation into the attempt on his life. Upon further inspection, officials had found a second jewel casket hidden in a closet, which, when opened and its contents examined, proved to be the actual chest Argas should have brought in.

"Whoever did this," said Sephil, "simply substituted one casket for another, without having to steal Alassil's keys at all."

Propped up on pillows, Zhanil coughed, straining for enough breath to speak. His throat hurt whenever he swallowed, making speech painful. "It was one of the servants?"

Sephil nodded. "It was certainly someone who knew what your jewel casket looked like and with access enough to change it. Do not speak, Zhanil, and do not trouble yourself with the matter right now. Your grandfather is having all of the servants questioned. We will find who did this."

When he recovered enough to notice, Zhanil saw that two men had been removed from his household. Alassil could tell him only that they had been taken away for further interrogation, but when word came back that they had been executed in prison, he knew why. As for the official report, Zhanil never saw it, and never learned who had hired the men or precisely how they accomplished the deed. Adeja muttered that Tajhaan could have carried out the attack, never mind that he blamed the Turyar with his very next breath. "They threw *daku* over the walls at Mekesh."

"Would you just make up your mind?" Zhanil asked irritably. "It could just as easily be Tajhaan."

Adeja scowled at him. "Your grandfather is hiding the report for a reason. What better one could he have than wanting to avoid another incident with the Turyar?"

"You forget that Grandfather enjoys keeping everyone else guessing."

Once Lakkel returned from Rhodeen with the invitation, Zhanil no longer had time to dwell on the assassins or their motives. Preparations kept him occupied from dawn until dusk, leaving him with very little private time for nearly two weeks. What little leisure he had, he spent with Arjuna, who visited with a week's leave and no opinion about his father's mysterious absence.

Arjuna brought a small gift for his mother, who thanked him while admonishing him in the same breath to save his money. Without his uniform, he blended in with the servants, and could observe the heightened activity as Alassil directed the selection of clothing and other necessities.

"Just think," he said, leaning against the lid of a large ironbound chest, "if you'd just waited two years, you could have entered Rhodeen legitimately and avoided that arrow in your shoulder."

"Maybe, but I suspect it's *because* I went in the first place that I'm being invited back now," replied Zhanil. Arzhati wanted something from him, but what? "Come on, let's go downstairs. There's too much going on up here, and all this activity is driving me mad."

Followed by Nahar, they walked through the royal gardens and discussed military matters. "Tacumé is a good post," said Arjuna. "I've never been outside the academy, of course, and won't receive my first commission for another six months, but I've heard good things about Mettos. The weather is fair, the food fresh, and the mail current. If Sufhír and Medás had decent roads connecting them with the capital, it might not be so bad."

"I know," said Zhanil, chuckling. "I helped *build* half a mile of road in the summer heat. The king uses the local infantry to supplement the engineering corps."

"I heard you spent most of your free time at Medás making candles."

Zhanil grimaced, wondering who had told Arjuna. Given how rarely father and son talked these days, he doubted it was Adeja. "At least I didn't have to chop up an animal's intestines to make the tallow."

"Or the soap that's also made from the tallow," said Arjuna. "Knowing you, you'd probably rub potash into your eyes and blind yourself."

Laughing, Zhanil nodded. "That's true. You didn't have to do the same in the academy, did you?"

"No, officers aren't expected to have trades. I would have thought your grandfather would enroll you in the academy rather than send you all the way to Medás."

"It's quite simple," replied Zhanil. "Half the time, he doesn't trust me to run my own affairs, much less anyone else's. It's all right, Arjuna. I don't mind the army. It's actually a pleasant change from all this ceremony and responsibility."

Zhanil would have liked to have Arjuna along on the trip to Rhodeen, both for company and as a distraction against Kalmeki. Once, he would have told his friend about the Turya, but now, when he should have introduced them, he held back.

It isn't as though they're rivals, he thought, yet however he tried, Zhanil could not shed the feeling that somehow they were.

That evening, over supper with Arjuna, Zhanil received a message. "We leave in three days," he said, handing the paper to Alassil. "That should put us in Rhodeen in about five weeks."

"I won't ask if you're anxious," said Arjuna.

Zhanil speared a morsel of beef on his fork and popped it into his mouth. "Then I won't lie and say I'm not. It's a diplomatic visit, but I have no idea what to expect. Thank the gods Agantine is better prepared than I am."

"My father isn't going with you, is he?"

"Oh, gods, no, even if he were in the city. He can't even tolerate the ambassadors who visit now."

Arjuna frowned. "I'd noticed he wasn't on duty, but I had no idea he was gone altogether."

"He's received a post escorting mail and supply trains to the valley of Aring," replied Zhanil. "I don't know who arranged it, or how they got around his non-enlisted status, but he needs to be away right now. I know he's your father, Arjuna, but I can't have him insulting the Turya ambassadors or pointing knives at everyone in sight every time someone threatens my life."

"I understand, Zhanil." Setting down his glass, Arjuna stared into his lap. "Gods, you have no idea how much I do."

"We were both there that day," Zhanil said softly.

"But you didn't have to go home with him afterward." Arjuna sighed, then said, "I only wonder that you didn't send him away sooner."

* * * *

Khalgar's backwater territories had few roads. Army engineers had only begun to extend the network into Ottabia, which meant the royal caravan had to spend seven days or more climbing over rough hills with wagons whose wheels did not like the inclines. By going east through Mettos, they could have circumvented the hills altogether, but that would have added three weeks to a trip already scheduled to take thirty days.

"As long as it does not rain," said Agantine, "we will be fortunate."

Their Turya honor guard viewed the slow progress with distaste. "Not even the *turkan* travels with such baggage," complained Lakkel, motioning to the wagons. "We might have been in Rhodeen by now."

Agantine favored him with a smile. "Patience, friend. Rhodeen is not going anywhere, the weather is fair, and we have plenty of provisions."

In place of the cumbersome canvas tents used in Khalgar, the Turyar provided their yurts. These were larger and more comfortable than the one Zhanil and his companions had occupied on their earlier trip, floored with thick felt carpets and furnished with cots and folding tables, but they were no less smoky.

"At least one can say that they are warm and can be assembled quickly," said Agantine. "Did you say that the Turyar burn dung as fuel?"

"Yes," replied Zhanil, "when there isn't any wood. From what I've heard, there aren't many trees in the Turya-lands."

During the day, Lakkel rode beside them, answering whatever questions they had about the *turkan* or Turya customs, while Kalmeki hung back with Amset and the other attendants. At night, they took their meals together but slept apart. Zhanil grasped the necessity, while yearning for greater intimacy. Their enforced celibacy should not have affected their friendship the way it had.

One afternoon, bored with the endless rolling vistas of Ottabia, Zhanil suggested to Kalmeki and Amset that they race to the summit of the next hill. "I think the horses would appreciate the exercise, and this slow pace is maddening."

Kalmeki just stared at him. "You know that I will beat you, yes?"

"Excuse me?"

Amset cleared his throat. "Now be civil, you two," he warned.

"Let the boys have their race," laughed Agantine. "It will give them something to do."

"Sir, I have not been a boy for some years now," Kalmeki replied stiffly.

"Young man, I am old enough to be your father, so I may do as I please." Agantine nodded and smiled, adding, "Unless, of course, there is some quaint Turya custom that says a man cannot be addressed as such after a certain age. Go race and enjoy yourselves."

Leaving the column and galloping ahead, Zhanil took the opportunity to ask Kalmeki exactly how old he was.

Kalmeki glared at him. "You never thought to ask before?"

Zhanil shrugged. "Call me stupid," he replied. "I was preoccupied with ... other things."

"Yes, I can see that. Since you ask, I am twenty-three."

Without warning, Kalmeki surged ahead, urging his horse down the slope. Zhanil's shock turned to outrage as he hastened to catch up. Even with a fair start, racing against Kalmeki on horseback would have been futile, but Zhanil gave it his best, managing to come in alongside the other man as they galloped across the narrow trough and up the slope of the next hill. Behind him, he heard shouts and whistles from the caravan.

"That was not fair," he gasped.

"You wanted a race," said Kalmeki. "You did not say I had to wait for the signal."

"I would have beaten you this time."

Kalmeki smiled as he flicked the reins, bringing his horse about for the return trip. "I doubt it. I was raised in the saddle, while you have had too much soft living."

While those around them exchanged tolerant looks, Zhanil and Kalmeki debated their respective horsemanship skills until supper. Still convinced that Kalmeki had seized an unfair advantage, and vowing to beat him one day, Zhanil retired to the yurt he shared with his uncle.

"You seem happy," observed Agantine.

"It was good exercise."

Accepting an extra blanket from his groom, Agantine dismissed the young man. "For a race that lasted no more than ten minutes, it must have been exceedingly good exercise. I think you enjoyed the argument more."

"You saw how Kalmeki cheated," replied Zhanil, undoing his belt. "And then he has the nerve to deny it, saying he would have beaten me anyway. Gods, he can be so insufferable sometimes!"

"Judging from the pleasure you took in arguing with him, I think you were perfectly happy being defeated," observed Agantine. Zhanil let his belt hang from his hands. "How can you say that?"

"Boy, I have seen that glow too many times before not to recognize it. You forget that I used to be married."

Abashed, Zhanil hid his reaction in his tunic as he pulled it over his head. "I think Kalmeki would make a very awkward, clumsy bride. However, if he has a sister, and I had enough horses to buy her—"

Agantine laughed heartily. "Your mother would have a conniption if you brought home a Turya bride."

The thought alone made Zhanil pause. "Uncle," he said, "do you think that's why Arzhati wants to see me?"

"To offer you a Turya bride?" Agantine shook out his blanket and spread it over his legs. "Unless he has a wife and daughters back in the Turya-lands, he only has the one son, and I doubt Kargil is going to put on a red veil for you. No, Zhanil, I think the *turkan* simply wants to improve relations between his people and his wife's kinsmen. He has extended the same invitation to your father for several years now, but Sephil will not go. His reluctance is understandable, and Arzhati respects that, so the *turkan* is inviting you in his place. I do not think there is anything more to it than that."

Late the next morning, they left the hill country and crossed the border into Rhodeen. By sunset, they reached Meduin, which meant that for the first time in ten days they could sleep indoors and enjoy a proper bath.

At the boarding house, Zhanil endured curious glances and not a few comments about his change in identity. Without ceremony, the healer Uzhena approached and asked how his shoulder felt.

"It is as good as new," he told her, rotating his arm as proof.

She nodded, then glanced past his shoulder, giving Amset an appreciative look. "I see you brought the good-looking one, and left the insufferable old one at home."

"I will tell Adeja that you missed him," said Zhanil.

"Is that his name?" she asked. "If you tell me that old goat is also a prince in disguise, I will not believe you."

"He is a soldier," replied Zhanil, "and one of my bodyguards. Seeing as how his wife is so jealous of your interest in him, I thought it best that he stay home this time."

Uzhena snorted. "She can have him, poor woman. Now if this one's wife does not want him—" Again, she smiled at Amset, who somehow managed to keep a straight face. " she can send him to me."

Behind her, Zhanil spied Hattu and nodded at him. "Are you certain your husband will not mind?"

Hattu laughed. "If Amset does not mind the work satisfying her, then he is welcome to try."

At supper, the cook brought out two small wooden saucers filled with a white, frothy liquid and placed them before Zhanil and Agantine. "Kumiss," she said.

Zhanil brought the saucer to his lips and ventured a small sip, recoiling at the pungent taste. "Gods, what is this stuff?"

Where others might have been offended, the Turyar simply laughed. "It is fermented mare's milk," explained Kalmeki. "It is made by pouring the milk into a skin and churning it until it sours and makes butter. Of course, it is best served cold."

Agantine left his portion untouched. "I did not think it was possible to milk a mare."

"It is very difficult, but it can be done." Kalmeki indicated Agantine's saucer with a subtle thrust of his chin. "You will want to become accustomed to drinking kumiss. The *turkan* greatly enjoys it and will no doubt offer it to you."

Zhanil tried another sip, noting that the aftertaste resembled almond milk. To his surprise, Kalmeki prevented him from taking a third sip. "If you are not accustomed to it, it will go to your head."

Agantine tried a sip and, not surprisingly, gagged at the taste. "Forgive me," he said, reaching for his ale, "but I hope the *turkan* does not mean for us to drink the entire thing."

After supper, Kalmeki escorted them upstairs, where they shared a room furnished with two comfortable beds. Agantine went inside, but Zhanil lingered in the doorway, waving Amset to his room with a signal that all was well.

"Kalmeki," he said softly, "what does the *turkan* want with me?"

In response, Kalmeki took a step forward, until they stood almost close enough to kiss. "This is not the first time you have asked," he answered. "Are you afraid that he will send you home in pieces?"

Zhanil resisted the urge to warn him to move back. "Don't make jokes. I had an uncle who ended up like that."

"I am not joking," said Kalmeki. "That is precisely what you fear: ending up mutilated and without your head. I was only a child, but I had kin who fought in Rhodeen, so I know the tale. War is one thing, but the time for fighting has passed. Arzhati simply wishes his son to have kinsmen outside the Turya-lands."

"Did he tell you that?"

"He does not have to tell anyone. If you were Turya, you would understand how important kinship is to our people."

As reasonable as this sounded, Zhanil doubted it was Arzhati's only motive. "So he is simply doing this for Kargil's sake?"

Kalmeki nodded. "If I had sons," he said, "I would make peace for them also."

* * * *

Ten days later, the caravan reached the banks of the Khul. Watered by this broad, meandering river that cut Rhodeen in two and gave its name to the capital, the surrounding lands were lush and green, supporting orchards, horse farms and estates.

"If the river is as deep as it is wide," commented Zhanil, "we could have sailed straight from Khalgar and shaved at least two weeks off the trip."

Agantine gazed out at the river. "It is a sound idea, but I have heard that the Khul's estuaries are too shallow to be navigated by our vessels. However, it seems there is plenty of river traffic between Cassiare and the capital."

"It is only the native people who use the barges," said Kalmeki. "Turyar do not care for the water." Turning, Zhanil grinned at him. "Do you know how to swim?"

"Why would I need to know such a thing? There are no rivers or lakes in the Turya-lands."

So Kalmeki *did* have a few shortcomings. "In case you hadn't noticed," said Zhanil, "we're not *in* the Turya-lands. If we have time, and the weather gets a little warmer, remind me to teach you how to swim."

Late in the day, they reached the outskirts of Shemin-at-Khul. In its breadth and construction, the city invited comparison with Bhellin, inevitably falling short. Zhanil knew that sections of the outer walls had been toppled during the invasion; owing to the inferior masonry with which the breaches had been repaired, he could see exactly where the Turyar had flooded into the city.

Rhodeen was not known for its architecture. As the rest of the kingdom lacked the reliable system of roads that crisscrossed Khalgar's most populous regions, Zhanil was hardly surprised by Shemin-at-Khul's narrow streets. Even the central areas of the city, with its royal and administrative buildings, fared poorly in comparison with the wide thoroughfares that accommodated Bhellin's heavy traffic.

Was it always like this, wondered Zhanil, or is it that the Turyar don't know how to maintain a city?

As he and his companions turned a corner, ascending a cobblestone incline, Zhanil suddenly caught his breath. Two massive structures dominated the skyline of the upper city: colossal stone platforms laid one atop the other to form roughly triangular shapes. Pyramids, his father called them,

and opened a book to show Zhanil an illustration, but nothing Sephil did or said could have prepared his son for the immensity of the two buildings facing each other across what seemed to be several city blocks.

Agantine leaned over and explained, "Those are Tal Charne and Tal Sepha, the Pyramids of the Sun and Moon. They are both temples and tombs, and the kings of Rhodeen use Tal Charne for their coronations. However, I understand they have been closed since Arzhati took power, so I doubt we will be able to visit."

Palace attendants greeted them courteously, offering refreshments and rooms, but little fanfare. Zhanil had expected this from the beginning, and, now at the end of an exhausting month-long trip, decided he preferred an anonymous arrival to the endless pageant of ceremonies Khalgari custom demanded whenever foreign royalty visited.

From his apartment with its secluded terrace, Zhanil could look out over the city, and beyond, across the green river valley to the western curve of the Arpan Mountains.

"Is everything to your liking?" asked a voice from the doorway.

Zhanil's heart jumped a beat when he saw that Kalmeki was alone. Amset had taken charge of their baggage and was inspecting the apartment, leaving Zhanil unattended outside. And now with Kalmeki here, standing across from him in this lush, unfamiliar place, his imagination conjured numerous possibilities. *I could say anything, even kiss him, and no one would notice*.

"Yes, everything is fine," answered Zhanil. "Which one is that?" Turning slightly, he gestured to the pyramid behind him.

Kalmeki stepped up to the ledge and peered out. "I am not overly familiar with the city, but I think that one is for the Moon. I know that royal women are buried there, and children. We do not go there."

"How soon do you think it'll be before the *turkan* sees us?"

"Lakkel has gone to inform him of your arrival, but beyond that, I do not know. I doubt he will see you today, though," replied Kalmeki. "It is customary to give visitors time to rest."

"Gods!" exclaimed Agantine, stepping out onto the terrace. "It seems they have given you a palace of your own, Zhanil."

Zhanil invited his uncle to join them by the ledge. "I have not looked around," he admitted, "but surely your lodgings are the same?"

Agantine sat down on the edge of a dry fountain in the shade. "I am afraid not, son. Of course, I am quite satisfied with my own rooms," he said, quickly nodding at Kalmeki, "but what you will do with so much space, I do not know."

"Perhaps the *turkan* thought I would bring a larger household," replied Zhanil.

As evening fell over the city, they dined in Zhanil's spacious sitting room, among furnishings that did not seem to have been touched since the invasion. Turya servants brought in refreshments to compliment the leisurely conversation, but the need for rest drew the gathering to a close earlier than usual.

Zhanil stood in the center of a mirrored dressing room, mulling over the day's events and preparing for bed, when Amset came in with a message. "There is someone here to see you," he said.

"Surely it isn't the *turkan*?" Zhanil glanced down at his woolen robe and linen sleeping trousers.

"Unless the *turkan* is a woman, I doubt it," replied Amset. "Here, put this on over your trousers and put on your slippers."

Zhanil caught the tunic and pulled it over his head. "A woman?"

Amset nodded. "She's the *turkan's* wife, Lady Thano," he said. "You look presentable enough, Zhanil, and it's never a good idea to keep a lady waiting too long."

In the sitting room, Zhanil discovered that the woman who awaited him was past her youth, strands of gray threading her light hair and fine lines creasing the skin around her eyes and mouth. She wore a gown of embroidered wool and a simple gold chain, but it was her regal stance and resemblance to his father which drew his attention.

"My lady, forgive me for my unkempt appearance," he said. "I was not expecting company so late in the evening."

She inclined her head. "You need not apologize, Zhanil," she replied. "I would have come earlier, but I wished to meet with you in private. I am Thano, your cousin and lady of the palace."

Moving toward him, she studied his face intently. "You have the look of your father, but I see more of your uncle

Zhanil in you. It is fitting, I think, that you share your name with him."

Startled by the comparison, Zhanil could only bow his head and offer her a seat. "I should send for Prince Agantine. I am sure he will want to meet you."

"There will be time for such pleasantries tomorrow. I was you I wished to see," replied Thano. She let her gaze wander around the room, taking in the furnishings and decoration. "These apartments belonged to your father, and have not been occupied since. I thought it only proper that you should have them during your stay."

While the opulence belied his father's ascetic tastes and made him uncomfortable, Zhanil thanked the lady for the gesture. "My father sends his greetings. My mother also sends greetings, and a gift," he said. "I will present it to you as soon as your ambassador informs me that it is appropriate."

Thano covered his hand with hers, a maternal gesture he found comforting. "You do not have to stand on such ceremony, Zhanil."

"I have no idea what to expect from your husband."

"Did you come here expecting him to be angry with you?" she asked, smiling. "I will admit that he was quite astonished when he learned of your secret excursion across the border, but once Lakkel returned with your response and clarified the matter, I believe he was more amused than offended.

"I wished to see you because I desire news about my family. Nesha brings back little information, and your father does not write much. Perhaps he fears Arzhati or someone else will read his letters as a threat." Thano shook her head. "My husband cannot write more than his own name, and he is not literate."

Zhanil did not know what to make of her comment, whether she was disparaging Arzhati or trying to provide reassurance that the *turkan* did not read threats into personal correspondence. "My father is doing quite well," he replied. "He has his work in the temple of Abh to keep him busy."

Thano nodded. "I never imagined Sephil would become a priest. Your grandfather Brasidios did not approve of religion beyond what was absolutely necessary to appease the gods. He felt that priests should not have too much power or influence, and he made certain he instilled those views in his sons and nephews. I think he would have had an apoplexy had he known about your father entering the priesthood."

"So my father has told me," answered Zhanil. "He has nothing to do with politics. His ministry is the only thing that interests him."

"I truly hope that one day Sephil will change his mind and visit, so he may tell me about it," said Thano. "I should like very much to see him again, even though I was not very kind to him when we were young. Time changes things, and people. If you tell him, I think he will understand that.

"Family is important, Zhanil. I believe this, and so does my husband. In all these years, I have had no contact with my brother in Tajhaan, and what I have heard does not reassure me." Once again touching his hand, Thano stood. "But we can discuss this another time. I know you have had a long journey and want to rest. I merely wished to see you and assure you that you have nothing to fear tomorrow."

"Then the meeting is to be tomorrow?" asked Zhanil.

"Yes, of course," she replied. "It is not the Turya custom to keep guests waiting."

Offering her his hand, Zhanil escorted Thano from the sitting room out to the foyer. "Are any of the old customs still in place?"

"A few, but you will find that many prefer the newer ones," said Thano. "The Turyar have a beautifully uncomplicated way of doing things."

They reached the door, where the man assigned as the night guard stood ready to let Thano out. Zhanil wondered where her escort was, or if a Turya lady even required a chaperone. As he started to ask, another question came to his lips instead. "My lady, do you like kumiss?"

"Yes," she replied, "I have come to enjoy it."

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Chapter Fourteen

Palatial it might have been, but the apartment felt overlarge and empty, and strangely isolated from the rest of the palace. After seeing Lady Thano safely to the door, where a Turya warrior waited to escort her back to her chambers, Zhanil sent his attendants to bed and retired.

Exhaustion should have made sleep easy, but when it came time to lie down on the bed with its sheer golden canopy, Zhanil could not close his eyes or find a comfortable position. How could it be that these rooms, with their overabundance of silks and brocade, had once belonged to his father when Sephil, who regularly wore woolen robes and slept on a plain cot during his monastic retreats, was the antithesis of luxury?

Rhodeen loves its silks, Zhanil reminded himself, and who knows what the other royal apartments were like before the Turyar came? Father has said more than once that he wasn't always a priest.

Throwing an arm over his eyes to obscure the canopy's moonlit shimmer, Zhanil took no comfort in this rationalization. Something else about the room bothered him. At last, he reached for his robe and got up, pacing the chamber as he tried to puzzle out the eerie juxtaposition of opulence and emptiness.

Near midnight, he took a blanket from the bed and ventured out into the sitting room, where he dozed off on one of the couches. Amset found him there the next morning. "Was something wrong with the bed?"

Zhanil sat up and stretched stiff muscles. "See if you can't get one of the servants to take down that canopy. I swear, I think I'm sleeping in a Tajhaani harem."

A servant brought in a tray of steaming oatmeal and dried apples, while another prepared a hot bath. Zhanil spent half the morning fussing over his attire, searching his reflection for anything that might offend the *turkan* or betray affiliation with the old dynasty.

Agantine chuckled as he appraised the crimson velvet the servants had selected. "You look fine," he said.

"Listen to your uncle," added Kalmeki. "You will only call attention to yourself through all this worrying. The *turkan* is not a difficult man to please."

Zhanil brushed imaginary lint from his shoulder. "This is our first meeting. It's important that everything be perfect."

His earnest sentiments only drew laughter from the two men. "There is no such thing as perfection, lad," said Agantine. "You can plan and hope as much as you like, but whatever happens will happen.

"When I went to ask my wife's father for her hand, you should have seen the fool I made of myself. He let me finish rambling, and then promptly asked how the son of a king could be such a colossal nitwit. Had you been there, you would not have suspected that it would be a happy marriage, or that I would get on quite well with my father-in-law. You are properly dressed, you will be polite when the time comes, and all will be well."

As he turned back to the mirror for one last glimpse, Zhanil felt Kalmeki's hand on his arm, firmly drawing him away. "Only if you were wearing Turya garb could you look better."

Picturing himself in a long, open-front tunic like the beautifully embroidered one Kalmeki wore, Zhanil felt the sting of hindsight. "Gods, perhaps I should have—"

"With such fussing, one would think it was your wedding day," snorted Kalmeki. "And when *their* turn came to take wives, my brothers did not make half the scene you are making now."

"I assure you, Lord Kalmeki," said Agantine, "Khalgari princes do not typically behave like this. Zhanil has been out in public before, so he knows better."

Embarrassed, Zhanil took the hint and left the dressing room. Not long after, a messenger arrived with an official summons and an escort.

Agantine drew Zhanil aside. "I do not think I have to remind you to follow my lead. Everything will be fine."

As they moved through the corridors and galleries of the palace's upper levels, Zhanil took greater note of his surroundings than he had the day before. Absent were the luxurious fabrics and tiles so abundant in his apartments, though under the plain woodwork and felt hangings bearing Turya motifs, he could still discern hints of what must have been the original decoration.

Nothing could have obscured the sunburst carved into the heavy oak door that opened to admit them. Within was not an elaborate audience chamber, but a room much like the king's private salon in Bhellin, with tall windows that looked out over the city and the river beyond.

Zhanil recognized Lakkel, and Thano standing behind a carved wooden chair, yet it was the man seated in that chair who drew his attention.

Later, he would reflect that, whatever vague impressions he had formed about the *turkan*, the reality was quite different from the giant, barbaric warrior he had halfexpected to meet. In appearance, Arzhati was quite unremarkable: a middle-aged man with graying yellow hair pulled back into a long braid, and a broad, weathered face better suited to a peasant than a warrior-king. Had he not possessed the sort of quiet, formidable presence that compelled Zhanil to stand up straight, the charisma that led men to war, Arzhati might have been mistaken for a farmer.

With a little bow, Lakkel stepped forward and began formal introductions. "Great *turkan*, these are your guests, Prince Agantine ké Ampheres and his nephew, Prince Zhanil Sephides."

As Arzhati rose from his chair, Zhanil felt brief surprise, even disappointment, that he was not as tall as Kalmeki or some of the other Turyar.

"May the door open to greet you, may the hearth burn more brightly in your presence, as you honor us," said Arzhati, speaking the traditional words of greeting with an accent so thick it was almost unintelligible. Then, looking directly at Zhanil, he added, "So you are the young troublemaker, come at last to my hall. Speak, boy, or do you think I will swallow you whole, heh?" What struck Zhanil at that moment were not the words themselves, but the idea that Arzhati would probably get along quite well with his grandfather. Both men were practical, and neither wasted time with formalities.

"Whole, no, but perhaps in pieces," replied Zhanil, praying his response would be taken in the correct spirit. It was not the greeting he had intended to make.

Arzhati's eyes widened and he laughed. "You have a sense of humor, boy."

Zhanil bowed his head. "I am hoping you also have one, sir."

"Pardon, my lord," interrupted Agantine, "but my nephew is anxious and has no wish to offend you."

"He speaks plainly," replied Arzhati. "How could he possibly offend me? Come, sit down and break bread with me."

In a small side room, a table had been prepared. Loaves of warm bread, dried fruit, ale and cheese enticed the guests.

"It is a shame your father did not wish to come," said Arzhati. "We have sent gifts and all assurances that he would be welcome. Does he not trust our word?"

Although the question had been directed toward him, Zhanil let his uncle answer. "Prince Sephil does not wish to leave his duties in the temple of Abh," replied Agantine. "Nor does he wish to draw attention to himself by coming here."

Arzhati glared at him, then at Zhanil. "How old are you, boy?"

"I am nineteen, sir."

"And you cannot speak for yourself?"

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Zhanil nodded apologetically at Agantine, then answered, "In Khalgar, it is customary to let the elders speak first, sir. What my uncle says is true. My father is committed to his temple duties and does not like to travel too much, but he accepts your gifts with good grace."

"We have temples to Abh here in Rhodeen," said Arzhati. "He is a useful god, and his priests do good work, so we have kept his worship."

"My father is glad to hear that," replied Zhanil. Clearly, the *turkan* wanted him to say more, to admit that Sephil declined to visit out of resentment, but no matter how hard Arzhati pressed, Zhanil did not intend to make that blunder. "He is on friendly terms with Lord Nesha and the other ambassadors you have sent, and has spoken no ill of you either in public or private."

Arzhati offered him the platter of dried apples and apricots before selecting fruit for himself. "We will see," he said, popping an apricot into his mouth. "Perhaps our good treatment of you will soften his heart. When you go home, you will be sure to tell him that we are not savages here in Rhodeen."

What does it matter what my father thinks of you? Whatever the turkan's motive, it obviously strayed beyond personal sentiment into the realm of political necessity. *He wants something*, thought Zhanil, *and cannot get it without my father*.

"Kargil is not here right now," continued Arzhati, "but he will come later in the day. You and he are near in age, and kinsmen, so hopefully you will take to each other like brothers. It cannot pleasant for you here, such a young man, without companions your own age."

"I look forward to meeting him," said Zhanil. "As for companions, Lord Kalmeki has been most gracious with both his time and assistance."

Thano, sitting beside her husband, leaned over and whispered in his ear. Zhanil had no idea what she said, but when Arzhati burst out laughing, his confusion only increased.

Arzhati looked at Zhanil, then at Kalmeki and back again as though comparing them. "My wife tells me that in your tongue, your name means 'little star,'" he finally said.

"Yes, that is correct, sir."

Once again, Arzhati laughed. "Then you are *both* 'little star,' both *Kalmeki*. You are *keshkai*."

"I am not certain I understand."

"You and Lord Kalmeki both have the same name," explained Thano. "Among the Turyar, this makes you *keshkai*, two halves of one spirit."

The very sound—*keshkai*—suggested intimacy, a formal bond, a label lending legality to their forbidden closeness. Zhanil looked over at Kalmeki, who showed no reaction. "Did you know about this?"

"No, I did not. I am not as fluent in this tongue, and I had not given any thought to the old royal names."

"Keshkai can be two people born in the same hour, or those who share the same name or identical birthmarks," explained Arzhati. "If they are male and female, the gods demand that they marry, for it is known they are one soul. You must stay together as brothers, and closer than brothers, for the gods have decreed this. When you go home to Khalgar, Kalmeki must go with you."

Zhanil nearly choked on his ale. *Oh, gods, not this. It will* be a scandal, a disaster. "On my return, I must report for army duty. Lord Kalmeki will not be able to accompany me there, and I am sure he has duties elsewhere. I would not want him to feel chained to me."

His protests carried no weight, and only seemed to irritate his host. "This is not to be negotiated," Arzhati said sternly. "That you are already friends is a sign that you are truly *keshkai*, so not to observe the law is to offend the gods. For now, you will lodge together, and I will send a message to your king to tell him the rest."

Once alone on his terrace, Zhanil clenched his fist against the ledge and cursed the gods, his cousin, and Turya custom for his predicament. *Why did Thano have to notice and comment upon it? So Kalmeki and I have the same name—it means nothing, and it will come to nothing but trouble if I have to take him home with me. He is not some stray puppy, and Grandfather is not going to understand.*

Any sympathy he might have expected from Kalmeki died the moment the man arrived in his apartments with his possessions. "I did not know beforehand, but if the gods demand this," said Kalmeki, "I will obey."

Zhanil crossed his arms over his chest. "For us to stay together like this—surely you understand why this isn't a good idea?"

Kalmeki nodded, yet the look in the eyes said the situation was hopeless. "If our beliefs offend you, there is nothing I can do about it." Glancing over his shoulder, he gazed down the corridor toward the rooms Amset had closed. "I will sleep there."

I want you out. I want you gone. Turning on his heel, Zhanil went back outside to sit by the dry fountain and brood. The day was beautiful and warm, inviting an excursion into the city, yet as neither he nor Agantine had been granted leave to venture outside their rooms, he was trapped indoors with no outlet for either his curiosity or his rising frustration. Oh gods, no, I don't want you gone, but this is impossible. Give it a day or two, and we won't be able to stop touching each other.

Amset, who stood sentry under a tree, shook his head. "Fate has not been kind to you, Zhanil."

"I hardly need you to tell me that," grumbled Zhanil. "The gods are punishing me for my stupidity. This would never have happened had I never crossed the border." Letting his head droop, he raked his fingers through his hair. "My grandfather is never going to understand this business, and when I go back into the army—it's going to create a scandal. I mean, what is Kalmeki supposed to *do* in Khalgar?"

"I'm sure the *turkan* will take that into consideration," said Amset. "Kalmeki will probably remain an ambassador and have duties of his own."

"Am I interrupting you?"

Kalmeki, standing in the doorway, looked irritated at being the topic of discussion. Zhanil hesitated, then beckoned him forward. "Do your laws say we have to stay together every hour of the day, every single day? I mean, do you have to accompany me to the privy?"

"I assume you are joking? No, we are not chained to each other like that. If you wish to complete your army service, I do not see that it is a problem. I will simply wait."

"Wait, and do *what*, Kalmeki? It could be four or five years, and we have no provision for this sort of thing in Khalgar."

Amset smothered a smile, while Kalmeki threatened him with a dirty look. "As your guard says, perhaps I will continue as an ambassador," Kalmeki replied coldly. "I am sorry if this is *such* an inconvenience for you, but our way—"

Angry now, Zhanil got to his feet. "Don't start with me. You might find it hard to swallow, but the rest of the world doesn't necessarily follow or care about the Turya way. This whole thing is ridiculous. Arzhati wants to bind us together based on a *name*? Surely you can't be the only one in the Turya-lands called Kalmeki?"

"No," Kalmeki said defensively, "there is a warrior at Hapaniku also by that name."

"Then why isn't *he* traipsing along after you as your *keshka*?"

"Because he is much older than I am. It is not as simple as you think. Were we born in the same hour, or marked in some other special way, this would be a clear sign, but a shared name is more difficult. The *turkan* has seen that you and I have a history together. He knows that we met by chance, that our paths keep crossing, and we have become friends. He takes these things as signs from the gods," explained Kalmeki. "It is not as bad as you think. Even in the Turya-lands, *keshkai* live separate lives; we would not be expected to dwell in the same yurt together."

"Or in the same apartment," said Zhanil.

Once again, Kalmeki glanced at Amset. "The *turkan* has commanded that we lodge together. Of course, I could have stayed where I was, but your guard tells me you find the place empty and strange. Having a friend under the same roof might make your stay more bearable."

"What would make this whole thing bearable is being able to go out." Zhanil gestured to the city beyond the terrace. "I don't suppose we can go exploring, can we?"

"The *turkan* has said you are to be kept safe here, but I will have Lakkel ask what privileges you are to be granted."

"We're here as Khalgari princes."

Kalmeki nodded. "Yes, but some might recognize you as belonging to the old blood. Already, two servants here in the palace have said that you resemble your uncle, and Lakkel tells me that the lady has said the same. However, it is Turya custom to entertain guests, so I do not think you will be bored for much longer."

That afternoon, Agantine joined them in the sitting room to discuss the morning's interview. "It went well," he said, looking at Zhanil, "though I am not certain I approve of all your responses."

"If Arzhati is making jokes at our first meeting, then he obviously isn't interested in formalities," said Zhanil. "He took my answers in good spirit, which is, I think, what he intended. If you're going to be concerned about something, I would focus more on how preoccupied he seems with having my father's approval."

Agantine reached over to help himself to a cup of wine from the tray a servant had brought in. Rhodeen could not compete with Khalgar's famed vintages, yet it still produced a palatable wine. "I noticed that also. Yes, it is clear that Arzhati wants something from your father."

Zhanil glanced over at Kalmeki, who observed without commenting. "Can you tell us anything about this?"

"I know that the *turkan* wishes to be on good terms with the remnants of the old dynasty, but other than that, I cannot say. Lakkel may know more."

Without sufficient information, all anyone could do was speculate, a fruitless activity that took away from the preparations necessary for that evening. Earlier, word had come that the *turkan* planned a formal supper in their honor, which would include the drinking of kumiss and an exchange of gifts. Agantine had the two Khalgari carpets brought in and inspected, and ordered the sealed jars of Besarian white and Mittosian red cooled in a tub of water.

"I will present the gifts to the *turkan*," he said to Zhanil, "while you present your mother's gift to the Lady Thano."

The necklace, its intricate silverwork studded with amber and carnelian, lay in a cedar box lined with black velvet. Ketalya had chosen it based on Lakkel's advice as to what would appeal to a Turya lady. Zhanil thought it too heavy for the throat of such a slender lady, and blushed at the chivalrous picture his presenting it to her would make.

"Should I say anything?" he asked.

"As little as possible," replied Agantine. "State that the gift is from your mother, then let the gesture speak for itself. I imagine that once he receives his gifts, Arzhati will do plenty of talking."

Late in the afternoon, a servant arrived with a parcel from Thano. Agantine inspected the note, then turned to Zhanil. "It is for you," he said.

When Zhanil unfolded the crimson wool, he found it was an open-front tunic cut in the Turya style, embellished with intertwining vines and serpents in green, gold, and sky blue silk. As he admired the superb workmanship, Kalmeki took the note from Agantine and read it. "The lady made this for you in the colors of your mother's house," he said. "However, she apologizes for borrowing one of your garments to test the fit before giving it to you; the tunic has since been returned to your wardrobe."

"I am sure you will look splendid in it," said Agantine, "and if it will stop your fussing in front of the mirror, it will be a relief to us all."

Not only did the tunic fit perfectly, but it was comfortable. Zhanil returned to the mirror to admire the elegant figure he presented, while Agantine looked on in amusement and both Kalmeki and Amset chided him for preening. "Had the lady known what a peacock he is," said Amset, "she might have seen a green tunic instead."

Their escorts led them down one level to a small hall hung with colorful felt tapestries and glass oil lamps. Aside from the servants, who moved about the tables bearing platters of food and drink, Zhanil counted no more than twenty people. He recognized Lakkel, as well as the *turkan* and his wife, but no one else.

Then, as his gaze wandered to the place beside Arzhati, Zhanil saw a face he knew. While the *turkan* had mentioned his son in passing, neither he nor anyone else indicated that Kargil would be present at the banquet. *Of course, he would, and none of us thought to bring him a gift*.

Zhanil groaned at the omission. *A prince should know better*.

Seated between Agantine and Kalmeki, he took his place at the high table; Amset was given a place at a lower table nearby.

Kalmeki had already explained that there were protocols to be observed at Turya banquets, specifically in the presenting of gifts to the host. "Presents of food and drink come first," he said. "Then once everyone has broken bread together, other gifts may follow."

Once all the guests had arrived, Arzhati called for the ritual invocation to the Storm God and Earth Mother, whose images occupied niches set above the high table. Following Kalmeki's lead, Zhanil rose and turned, lifting his palms in supplication, yet as he did not know the Turya prayers, he remained silent.

In the center of the floor, a table awaited the guestofferings. When Kalmeki gave him the signal, Agantine rose, stepped down to the floor, and presented Arzhati with the jars of wine. "As we in Khalgar understand that it is customary to offer gifts of food and drink at a Turya feast, we bring you our best wines." "Tonight we will drink your gifts," said Arzhati, "and offer you our best."

When Agantine returned to his seat, Zhanil touched his arm, indicated Kargil with a glance, and shook his head. "We brought nothing?"

Agantine looked, then nodded, understanding the dilemma. "Do not worry," he whispered. "It was not an oversight. This is a first visit, so the only gifts we are expected to bring are for our hosts."

Courses of soup, meat, and vegetables were served, along with loaves of hot barley bread. Zhanil ate with relish, while listening to the conversation around him. Arzhati had retained several high-ranking Rhodeen lords to serve on his council. These men observed Zhanil with great interest, asking questions he was more than happy to have his uncle answer.

"Your father was never much of a public figure, as I recall," said one, a large man with sanguine features who introduced himself as Ardal Melandes. "In fact, I believe he was something of a nonentity. However, he seems to have ensured that *you* received a proper education."

I have no dynastic ambitions, Zhanil wanted to reply. *I'm here as a guest, so leave me alone*. "My education is the same one all Khalgari princes receive," he said quietly.

"Including lessons in our language?" asked another lord, a wiry old man who claimed to have served Zhanil's greatgrandfather.

"Yes," interjected Agantine. "As you may recall, Khalgar and Rhodeen have a long history of exchange and intermarriage. It is quite common to find Khalgari who speak more than one language, so there is nothing unusual in our nephew's fluency."

"I find it strange that Prince Sephil did not accompany you," said Ardal.

"Our brother-in-law devotes his time to his ministry in the temple of Abh, and has no interest in politics."

Melisan, the old councilor, snorted. "The king's younger son was never a religious person. He was more interested in consorting with entertainers and other low persons."

Zhanil stuffed a morsel of chicken into his mouth to prevent the retort he so urgently wanted to make. Under the table, he felt Kalmeki's hand on his thigh, reassuring him, while his uncle answered for him.

"As I recall," said Agantine, "Brasidios never took much interest in religion either."

"My lords, let us have some peace," Thano said firmly. "Our guests are not here to debate with you about times past or other troubling things. Let them enjoy their food and drink."

When he dared, Zhanil let his gaze slide in Kargil's direction. The prince occasionally addressed Lakkel or his mother, but otherwise remained uninterested in the conversation around him.

It was not long, however, before his father called attention to him. "Prince Agantine, Prince Zhanil, our son regrets he could not be present at our first meeting this morning, but he has just returned from visiting his grandfather at Hapaniku."

Although his expression did not change, Kargil lowered his head, a posture that told Zhanil he would rather be

elsewhere. By contrast, Arzhati was boisterous, clapping his only son on the back in obvious, if slightly drunken pride.

"It is a pleasure to meet him," said Agantine, nodding in the prince's direction.

"We have met before," added Zhanil.

Kargil looked over at him, frowning. "I do not think so. I am sure I would remember such a meeting."

"Last summer, you visited Medás to speak with one of the commanders. You and your men entered the first courtyard and stayed for perhaps ten minutes. You never even dismounted."

"Yes, I was there," admitted Kargil, "but I do not recall you."

"I was in uniform, standing sentry on the stairs."

"Are we to understand that you served at Medás as a common foot soldier?" asked Melisan.

Grinning, Zhanil turned to him and nodded. "If you knew my grandfather, you would know there is nothing unusual about a Khalgari prince serving in the army. Right now, in fact, I am on leave, but when I return home I will resume my duties."

Arzhati laughed, but Kargil did not share his amusement; he did not even smile. "Then I am afraid I did not notice you, Prince Zhanil," he replied.

"Well, son," said Arzhati, "at least tell us that your grandfather has persuaded you to marry."

Kargil clenched his jaw, discomfort oozing from him. "I will do my duty as you see fit, sir," he said quietly. "*Turkan* Atalash leaves the choice to you."

"Then we must find you someone suitable." Arzhati looked over at his wife, whose expression remained as blank as her son's. "Rulers in these lands make political marriages, do they not? In that case, we will find a princess for Kargil to marry."

Although his uncle had assured him that it had not been a deliberate omission, Zhanil regretted not having brought a gift for his cousin, some small token to soften his public embarrassment. As expected, Arzhati warmly appreciated the thick Khalgari carpets, and Thano seemed moved by the necklace, touching it as her attendant fastened it around her neck.

"One day I shall have to thank your mother in person," she told Zhanil. "For now, I shall send her something suitable in return, and perhaps include a little something for your sister."

"Thank you, but that will not be necessary. Our mother does not wish Ellina to become spoiled," replied Zhanil. "However, I will convey your greetings."

Still stroking the necklace, Thano tilted her head. "Ellina is fourteen, is she not? Surely she is old enough to receive some small token from a kinswoman?"

There was nothing in the lady's voice or manner to suggest anything was amiss, yet Zhanil found her insistence troubling. "Perhaps we should discuss this in private, my lady?"

Thano must have considered it an urgent matter. Once again, she appeared in Zhanil's sitting room just before bedtime. She still wore her court finery and the necklace, while Zhanil again found himself at a disadvantage in his sleeping trousers and robe. "I hope I have not offended you by suggesting I send a gift to your sister," she said.

"It is not customary to make gifts to junior members of the royal family, either here or in Khalgar," replied Zhanil. "Had that been the case, I would have brought something for Kargil."

While he expected an end to the matter, Thano thought otherwise. "Kargil knows it is not protocol, but Ellina is young, and young girls love trinkets. I will send her something nonetheless."

"Pardon my asking, but why are you so interested in her?"

"I also intend to send gifts to your parents, just as I sent you a gift earlier this evening," said Thano. "You and your parents and your sister are all my kin. Indeed, it would be strange if I did *not* send something."

Her explanation seemed perfectly reasonable, and might even have been the truth, but Zhanil suspected that Thano had motives beyond this. "Tell me, does your husband always speak so loudly and publicly to your son about marriage? Kargil did not seem terribly pleased to be embarrassed in front of so many guests."

Thano sighed. "Arzhati has never been one for subtlety, and he draws more attention to our son's fortunes and failings than perhaps he should. I understand it is quite customary in the Turya-lands, but then I imagine the other guests are usually family or close friends who have an interest in the matter. If it offended you, I apologize on his behalf." "Actually," said Zhanil, "I am more concerned at this moment with who he intends Kargil's bride to be."

Sighing, Thano sat down on one of the brocaded couches. "I have told you that he wishes to be reconciled with the other branches of the old royal family. He is doing this for Kargil's sake, to ensure a peaceful accession when the time comes. Arzhati married me to legitimize his rule among the Rhodeen nobility, and now he wants to find Kargil a bride of the old blood for the same reason. Since my brother and his Tajhaani supporters refuse to receive his ambassadors, Arzhati has no choice but to look toward Khalgar."

Zhanil took a seat across from her. "Is this why he sent for me, to discuss a dynastic marriage between Kargil and my sister?"

"Arzhati did not lie to your grandfather when he sent the invitation. He truly wanted to meet the young prince who trespassed in his realm and gave aid to his people," answered Thano. "Had your father come with you, yes, they would have discussed this matter, but since you have come here alone with your uncle, Arzhati hopes you will carry a favorable report back to Khalgar."

"I would have to see a lot more of Kargil to be able to say anything about him," said Zhanil. "With regard to arranging a marriage, you would do better to approach my uncle. His word carries more weight with my grandfather, and the king is the one who will have the ultimate say in when and who my sister marries."

Thano nodded. "Then I will speak to Agantine. We are hoping that, with improved relations between Rhodeen and

Khalgar, Kargil might journey to Bhellin and meet your sister. Turya custom does not expect a man to offer marriage to a woman so young or to a woman he has never seen, but if Kargil and Ellina become friendly, perhaps a marriage can be arranged for the proper time."

"My family might not approve of Ellina becoming a Turya bride."

"Kargil is only half-Turya," said Thano.

"Is he always so cheerful?" asked Zhanil. "I know what Ellina will say if he presents the same face to her as he did to us tonight."

"Do not mistake his brooding for his usual temperament. His father thinks it healthy to discuss marriage publicly, but Kargil does not like being pressured in this way, and does not like to have personal matters turned into public discourse," explained Thano. "I will arrange for you to spend time with him, if Arzhati has not already done so."

Somehow, Zhanil could not picture Kargil with a sunny disposition. Even when she was mature enough to appreciate a good husband, Ellina would probably find him wearisome, a far cry from the congenial men of her own family. "Of course, my grandfather will want assurances that my sister will be well treated."

"He need have no concern on that account. Turya men treat their women very well."

Zhanil looked at her. "What about you, my lady?"

Thano smiled tightly. "I will admit that it was difficult at first. When the city fell, there was much confusion and bloodshed here in the palace. I hid in my apartments with my

mother, with no idea what was happening except that there were Turyar all over the city. When we heard them fighting with our guards, we were terrified, and when they found us, we also expected to be killed. But they did not touch us. They kept us confined and relatively well-treated, but they did not speak our language and we did not know what they intended to do with us.

"After several weeks, Arzhati came to see us. In the beginning, you see, there were two leaders, Arzhati and his brother, but Lazphi died in the siege and now Arzhati was sole *turkan* here in Rhodeen. It took him more time to subdue the other cities and consolidate his power. Only then did he intend to deal with us. He came with many splendid gifts, and told us through signs that I would be his bride. There was no refusing him, and no escape, for the Turyar watched us very carefully to make certain we did not harm ourselves.

"I remember how I cried on my wedding day, but Arzhati was not rough, and once I understood enough of his language and customs, I saw he was not the savage I had thought he was. He has always treated me with the utmost respect, and doted on my mother while she was still alive. Ellina would not face the same ordeal should she come here as a bride. Kargil speaks her language quite fluently, and lacks his father's more objectionable habits."

"You want this marriage very badly," said Zhanil.

Thano nodded. "I want our family to be reconciled. I know my brother Dashir has daughters, but Tajhaan has not responded to our queries. In fact, none of our envoys has ever returned." "As I said before, my lady, all I can do is to convey your wishes back to my family. Agantine may be able to do more, but the decision ultimately rests with my grandfather."

Once she left, Zhanil retired to enjoy a few comforts before bedtime. The servants had prepared a hot bath in a sunken marble tub, adding oils to ease tired muscles and encourage sleep. When he returned to Bhellin, Zhanil meant to ask his father about the golden canopied bed and this white-and-gold confection of a bathroom, yet right now he wanted nothing more than a long, blissful soak and a good night's rest.

"It would seem I am disturbing you."

Oh, gods, not now. Kalmeki stood on the threshold, wearing a towel wrapped around his waist and nothing else. Zhanil stared at him, conscious of his own nudity. "You want a bath?"

"I am told this is the only bath in the household with running water," said Kalmeki. "I would not have come, but is too late to have the servants carry hot water up to my tub, and this palace does not have the communal tubs the Turyar use. However, if you are busy I will come back." His gaze roamed the gilded marble in obvious distaste. "Or perhaps I will wait until morning."

I'm never going to get rid of him. "Since you're here, you might as well join me."

"Are you certain?"

Zhanil wanted to throw something at him. "It was *your* idea to come here," he growled. "Now that you're here, stop being a pain and come in."

"If you feel that way," said Kalmeki, "perhaps I shall leave."

As he turned to go, Zhanil flung a sponge at his head. "I swear you want me to kill you! Get in the tub, or I'm going to come over there and drag you in."

The two attendants watched in horrified amazement until Kalmeki banished them with a word. Seeing how quickly they vanished at the sound of *keshkai*, Zhanil did not think they would return for quite some time.

Kalmeki stripped off his towel, bent to retrieve the sponge, and, while Zhanil was still admiring the firm curve of his ass, lobbed the sponge at Zhanil's head. "It is a very large tub," he commented, stepping down into the water. "It seems such a waste that it was built for only one person."

Zhanil seized the floating sponge and placed it on the lip of the tub. "The Turya servants here won't join me. Either they do things the Rhodeen way here, or they're too terrified by this monstrosity."

"Had I known how tasteless it was," said Kalmeki, "even I would have thought twice. I did not expect to find you here."

Leaning his head back against the marble rim, Zhanil closed his eyes. "I have too much to think about to go straight to sleep."

"You had a visitor before."

"Lady Thano wanted to talk to me in private. She and Arzhati want Kargil to marry my sister."

"Your sister is too young," said Kalmeki. "Our women are at least twenty before they wed, and they are very strong. It is they who rule, and fight, and hunt when the men are away. Your sister would not make a good Turya bride."

Zhanil opened his eyes. "I don't think Arzhati is looking for a traditional Turya woman for his son, and royal marriages can take years to arrange. Still, my grandfather isn't likely to send Ellina off to marry someone she doesn't like, not with my parents there to object."

"You do not think she would like Lord Kargil?"

"With such a sunny disposition, what woman *would* like him?"

Kalmeki scooped up a handful of water to sluice over his neck. "You have only just met him."

Zhanil tried very hard not to concentrate on how appealingly pink Kalmeki's fair skin was becoming in the hot water. "I suppose you're right. From now on, Thano and Arzhati will be discussing the matter with Agantine. I'm not really in a position to negotiate with my grandfather. I can't even seem to secure an audience with him when I need one."

"Is he truly so busy?"

"No, he just does it to frustrate me," said Zhanil.

Kalmeki shook his head. "I do not entirely understand your people. What good is a ruler or kinsmen if you cannot speak to him?"

"A king is not *supposed* to be approachable," replied Zhanil. "As for understanding, I don't know how I'm going to explain this *keshkai* business to him when he's plainly said that he doesn't want us seeing each other."

Kalmeki ducked his head under the surface to wet his hair, and Zhanil had to wait until he emerged before he had his

answer. "I know your grandfather does not approve. I sensed he sent you to the temple of Abh to keep us apart, though why he did not send you back to the army as he intended, I do not know."

"Soldiers aren't posted in the winter," answered Zhanil. "He had to do something with me until spring came."

"Your winters are so mild compared to ours it seems absurd," said Kalmeki. "I meant to visit or send a message when you became ill, but thought it unwise to give offense."

Zhanil offered a sheepish smile. "I really wasn't very presentable at the time. I suspect my orders for Mettos will be waiting the moment I return. I still don't know how I'm going to explain this business between you and me."

"Perhaps you should allow me to offer the explanation. It is a Turya custom, after all."

"Grandfather might not honor it."

"We will see," said Kalmeki. "If the gods have seen fit to make this bond, they will not let a foreign king, and one who is otherwise so careful about his dealings with the Turyar, break it. Do not worry so about things that have not come to pass."

Zhanil nodded. "I should talk, while we're sitting here naked and alone together in steaming hot water."

"I am not the first naked man you ever seen."

Yes, but you're the first one who makes me want to do scorching hot things with him in the dark. "You're right about that, too. So tell me, what happens if two keshkai are separated?"

"If they are permanently separated, then the outcome is not good," replied Kalmeki. "Misfortune follows, punishing any who prevent fate from running its course. So, you see, I am not one to disobey the gods."

"Then if one of us dies-?"

"If that is as the gods will, the bond is broken, and no one will suffer," said Kalmeki, "though I am told that *keshkai* prefer to die together, because they feel the loss so greatly."

Unwise or no, moved by impulse, Zhanil waded chest-deep through the water to grasp Kalmeki around the waist and kiss him. If the mouth of a fated lover was supposed to taste like heat and lightning, and awaken every current in his being, then Kalmeki was the one. Nevertheless, it was all too sudden, too new to accept gracefully. *The gods weave hidden threads to bind a man with the woman who will bear his children so they may find each other*, he thought. *If love is part of the thread, what if a man does not love a woman?*

"Is it natural for *keshkai* to do this?" he asked.

Kalmeki wrapped powerful arms around his middle, pressing Zhanil against his chest. "It is never natural between two of the same sex. Others would still condemn us."

"That wasn't quite the answer I'd hoped to hear."

"It will never be the answer you want." As Kalmeki hungrily returned the kiss, Zhanil threaded his fingers through the man's damp hair. They lingered over the kiss, savoring the play of lips and tongues for as long as possible.

At last, Kalmeki drew back. "I thought we would not do this."

Zhanil bent forward, pressing their foreheads together.

"Gods, I'd like nothing better than to make love right here, or take you to bed with me."

"The servants would be watching. They might even be watching now."

"You could have told me that *before* I kissed you," groaned Zhanil.

Smiling, Kalmeki reached up to push aside a few strands of hair that straggled across his face. "Then you would not have done it. A kiss between two *keshkai* can be forgiven. More than that, I would not dare in this place."

Zhanil reluctantly pulled away, sliding back toward his side of the pool. "Somehow, I know exactly what we're both going to be doing tonight."

"Do you?" asked Kalmeki.

One hand already inching toward his cock, Zhanil started and stared at his lover. "Don't tell me the Turyar don't do that either?"

"The wise women tell us that to waste our seed offends the Earth Mother."

"So you don't have prostitutes, you don't have boys, and now you're telling me that you don't even stroke yourselves when you get hard?" Worse than parody, it was a young man's worst nightmare. "Gods, Kargil should be foaming at the mouth wanting to get married."

Kalmeki offered a tolerant look, and the sight of his right hand firmly grasped around the head of his cock. "I said that was what the women tell us," he answered, "not what the men actually do."

Without prompting, he maneuvered himself onto the first step. Zhanil caught his breath at the sight of the erect cock rising before him, and the fist closed around it, squeezing and pulling, sliding the foreskin back and forth. The throbbing in his groin reminded him that his own cock needed attention, and the intent gaze Kalmeki turned on him encouraged him to reciprocate.

"I cannot see you," Kalmeki gasped, his voice strangled by need.

Zhanil climbed up onto the edge of the pool, where he sprawled on the slippery tiles, grabbing a towel for purchase with one hand while fisting his cock in the other. His eyes went to the door, searching for the servants who had withdrawn but must surely be lingering within earshot, waiting to be summoned back. If they saw what he and Kalmeki were doing, if they told others—no, it was already too late for that, and the threat of discovery, the thrill of the forbidden, only increased his pleasure.

He bit down on his lip to stifle his moan, torn between wanting to watch and closing his eyes. In the end, the former proved irresistible. Kalmeki obviously gave no thought to who might be listening or watching, for his head was thrown back, his lips parted, quivering in pleasure, and his pace quickened along with his breathing.

Pearls of semen jetted onto his belly as he grunted and cried out; the sight alone was enough to bring Zhanil to climax. With that image firmly in his mind, he gripped his cock, rubbing, thrusting his hips, increasing the tempo until he felt the familiar spasm, and squirmed in release.

Afterward, he lay back against the hard tiles, idly dribbling his fingers through his seed. "Gods, that was good," he murmured. Better, in fact, than he could have hoped, and as good as that night and their situation was going to offer.

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Chapter Fifteen

"I have your assurances that you enjoy the gifts you received at the feast," said Arzhati, "but to show my good intentions to your family, I mean to give you another. My wife, however, warns me that you will misunderstand the gesture, so I must explain beforehand that no offense is meant. Indeed, to be given such a thing is seen as a great honor."

Seeing the wooden box the *turkan* placed in front of him, his mind inadvertently replaying the *daku* incident, Zhanil looked over at Thano. "What is it?"

Whatever it contained, she seemed reluctant to speak. "Arzhati sent for this all the way from Hapaniku," she finally said. "When he took Rhodeen, he gave what is inside to his father as a token of his victory."

Zhanil glanced at his uncle, and then at Kalmeki, whose closed face and tense, awkward stance revealed his knowledge. *If this were merely my grandfather's crown, there would not be such a fuss*, he thought. "Do I even want to know what is inside?"

"It depends on how you feel about the dead, Zhanil," she replied. "Arzhati saw to it that your uncle and grandfather were buried in Tal Charne, but he sent their heads to his father."

Too large for a crown, the box was the right size to serve as an ossuary. *Oh, gods, there are bones in this chest. He is giving me a corpse*.

"This is our custom," added Arzhati, "to take a worthy enemy's head as a trophy. I did them a great honor, and my father has kept them well all these years. As a token of goodwill, I am giving them to you, either to take home or bury in the tomb."

When the *turkan* offered the key, Zhanil took it and placed it on the table. Knowing what was inside, he had no intention of ever opening the box. "Are you allowing me into Tal Charne?"

"For this purpose, yes, but it must be done in secret. Tonight, after sunset, if you wish," replied Arzhati. "Had your father come, I would have given him this honor. Now you may go in his place, and tell him afterward that it is done."

Zhanil did not take the box with him when he left the *turkan's* chambers, or spare any trouble over it beyond receiving Thano's assurance that it would accompany him down into the crypt that night.

Having received permission to roam the palace gardens, Zhanil let Agantine and Kalmeki steer him into the warm morning sunlight. In this green river country, the people enjoyed water gardens: mossy pools and miniature waterfalls, and streams with picturesque bridges; the Turyar, it seemed, continued the tradition because of the novelty, and perhaps because the sound of running water brought calm. As Zhanil moved down the shaded gravel-lined paths, losing sight of both the palace and the two pyramids, he began to feel more relaxed.

Members of the court, both Turya and Rhodeen, were out this day; the former greeted the trio politely and went their way, while the latter gave Zhanil curious glances he did not acknowledge.

Near a pool carpeted in bobbing water lilies, Zhanil found a solitary place to sit and think. His companions sat down on the bench beside him.

"I wasn't expecting this," he said quietly.

"It is somewhat more dramatic than most conciliatory gestures," admitted Agantine. "What your father and grandfather will think, I do not know." Beyond this, words seemed to fail him, and he sat quietly looking out at the water.

"They will be skulls," said Kalmeki, "quite safe to look upon."

His serenity disrupted, Zhanil turned on him. "You do not need to tell me that."

"Perhaps I do. From the way you move and speak, you think there is some terrible thing inside that chest. It is not our way to keep something ritually unclean," explained Kalmeki. "The heads would have been boiled before—"

"Kalmeki, would you just *stop*? However good your intentions, you clearly do not see this as we do." Zhanil concentrated on the green-tinged water and floating vegetation before him, so his friend would not see the depth of his revulsion. "Tokens of the dead are evil things. They should be put away, not displayed or given as gifts."

He felt Kalmeki's hand brace his shoulder. "And this is precisely what the *turkan* wishes to do, to give proper burial to the dead. But it is you who must preside over these rites, Zhanil, and to bring this about, yes, Arzhati must place the dead in your care. In order to honor you, it seems he must offend you in some way."

Had they been truly alone, Zhanil might have leaned against Kalmeki. Such quiet, intimate moments were as precious as last night's primal fondling. "Will you be accompanying us tonight?"

"You should not even ask. As your *keshka*, my presence is expected."

"I'd forgotten," said Zhanil. "It's going to take me a while to get used to it."

When they finally left the pool and began the long, leisurely walk back to the palace, Agantine commented, "Have you noticed that none of the Rhodeen nobles has approached us? They are looking, but not one of them has said anything."

"The *turkan* has forbidden it," replied Kalmeki.

"I take it that doesn't apply to any nobles invited to dine with us?" asked Zhanil. "The men we sat with last night wasted no time trying to question me."

Kalmeki nodded. "Hearth-custom is different, and the *turkan* was able to observe."

Upon their return, Zhanil was surprised to find an invitation to take exercise with his cousin in a private courtyard overlooking the gardens. His surprise only increased when he saw Thano standing beside Kargil, wearing leather bracers and a corselet over male garb. She held a bow, and a full quiver of arrows rested at her hip.

Right away, she noticed his reaction. "What surprises you more: that I can shoot, or that my husband would let me?"

Zhanil cleared his throat, searching for the correct words. "I had heard that Turya women could ride and fight, but as a princess of Rhodeen I naturally assumed—"

"That I would keep to my needlework and other domestic tasks?" finished Thano. "I was brought up in that fashion, yes, but a Turya lady is expected to ride with her husband and even defend his land when he is away. She is expected to train her children in the ways of the horse and bow if he cannot. The more traditional nobles frown at the thought of their queen shooting and riding like a man, of course, but there is much they have had to learn to endure." She winked at him and smiled. "The ladies in Khalgar also enjoy archery, yes?"

Knowing what she truly wanted to hear, and unwilling to divulge any more information about Ellina than necessary at this time, Zhanil nodded. "It is treated in a slightly more genteel fashion. I do not think our women could draw your bows." Even he had trouble firing a Turya composite bow; he could not master the special technique necessary to draw and release, never mind the timing all Turya horse archers employed: firing while the horse's hooves were in mid-air to avoid disrupting the shot.

Thano displayed her bow, which he could see was different from the ones Kargil and Kalmeki carried. "Turya women are taught to shoot from childhood," she explained, "but this one was made especially for me, and is more like the bows used here in Rhodeen."

Servants brought bows for Zhanil and Agantine, who seemed more interested in studying his than shooting. After a

half-hour and several passed turns, Kargil walked over, placed a hand on Agantine's bow and shook his head.

"If you think you can unlock the secret of its making simply by staring at it," he said, "or that we are going to undo centuries of secrecy by telling you, it is a waste of time. The day is for shooting and exercise, not study."

"My uncle is a scholar, not a fighter," said Zhanil.

Flustered, Agantine looked up at Kargil. "I have heard these bows can punch a hole through armor."

Kargil shrugged. "I know what my bow does when I shoot, not why or how. I will demonstrate, but I do not think you will learn much by it."

Later, over a private supper in Zhanil's apartment, Kalmeki confided that, like any Turya warrior who had to construct his own bow, Kargil knew perfectly well how the various elements worked. "He has no patience with those outside. I have known plenty of such men in the Turya-lands. They are content to keep their own ways and secrets, and prefer to have nothing to do with the world beyond."

"He's half-Turya," Zhanil pointed out, "and he was born here in Rhodeen. I expect he would take a more liberal view of things. Instead, you're telling me he's more traditional than his father. What makes his mother think Ellina would be a good match for him?"

"She is thinking in terms of political alliance," said Agantine, "and hoping the young people involved will conform. If she were any other mother, thinking of her son's happiness, she would find a Turya wife for him." "Is that what you intend to tell Grandfather?" asked Zhanil.

Agantine maintained a noncommittal expression. "If he asks me my personal opinion, I will tell him. When and if the time comes, I will most certainly tell your parents, though I do not expect that it will do much good if your grandfather decides the marriage is beneficial. Political marriages are not supposed to be love matches, Zhanil, whatever the Lady Thano might want or intend. She knows this, and so do you."

"Ellina would be miserable with Kargil."

"He would not dare mistreat her," said Kalmeki. "He may prefer a woman from Hapaniku, but as a Turya husband he knows his obligations. If he does not keep his wife happy, she will not give him sons and may even divorce him."

Zhanil snorted. "Do you really think Thano will share that information with Ellina?"

To his annoyance, Kalmeki merely smiled. "You are worrying about things which have not yet happened, and over which you have no control. If this marriage is fated to be, then it will be."

"With you, it is always fate."

Sunset had begun to color the horizon a vivid orange. Wincing at muscles strained that afternoon, Zhanil stepped out onto the terrace to enjoy the view. Earlier, he had stripped to the waist and allowed Kalmeki to rub soothing oil onto his arms and back. While the juxtaposition of soreness and rhythmic kneading was its own peculiar pleasure, Kalmeki undertook his task with such skill that Zhanil inevitably began to grow erect. "Perhaps I should have one of the servants do this," he said.

Kalmeki lowered his eyes and smiled. "There is no shame in enjoying it. Men are taught to take pleasure in hard exercise and the weariness that comes after. It is good for lovemaking."

"That wouldn't be a problem if I could just send for a woman, would it?" grumbled Zhanil. "I don't know how the people here can stand it without prostitutes."

A slick hand moved up the side of his neck, then down, fondling his deltoids where they met the collarbone. "I have heard rumors that some have tried to keep the business of selling women, but in secret. They are always caught and punished."

"That people are willing to take the risk should tell the *turkan* something," said Zhanil. "In Khalgar, the business is strictly regulated, so the women are clean and well-treated. Has Arzhati ever considered compromising?"

"Better to ask water to flow uphill," replied Kalmeki.

Zhanil ran his palms up his thighs, breathing hard as those warm, moist fingers dipped lower, moving from his collarbone along his pectorals, exploring the flesh around his nipples. "On the one hand, you treat sex as natural, while on the other, you make everything forbidden."

"Everything has its proper place," said Kalmeki. "It is you who wishes to do things improperly. Now then, I think you are feeling better."

As those kneading hands withdrew, Zhanil growled in frustration. "I wasn't ready for you to stop."

"Ah, I would not want to enjoy myself *too* much." Kalmeki turned to wipe his hands clean with a damp cloth. "If you are sore later, I will do it again, but the best remedy is more practice and less complaining."

Zhanil preferred a different sort of remedy, one at his own hand. Had Kalmeki stayed to watch, or even participate as he had last night, that would have increased his pleasure twice over. Instead, his lover decided to be difficult, even teasing. A clearer head would have called the move prudent.

At least one of us is, he thought, staring out across the city at Tal Sepha, an increasingly dark shadow against the sunset. More times than he could count, he wanted to tear Kalmeki's clothes from his body and pin him to the ground for a round of rough, intense lovemaking. Alas, it was not going to happen here, and he knew he was a fool if he thought he could do it at home and get away with it.

By degrees, the sun slid below the horizon, bringing the deep first darkness. Just as Zhanil finished his ale, an escort arrived to take them to Tal Charne. "The lady says to bring a cloak," said the man, "and to speak little."

They left the palace, climbed into a covered carriage, which took them as far as the pyramid precinct. In the gathering darkness, Zhanil saw that the gates were closed and guarded. By the light of a single lantern, the escort led him and his companions around the walls to a side entrance where the Turya guards admitted them. From there, Zhanil followed his escort up and down several paths that ran alongside an edifice he could not see in the pitch-black dark but whose enormous mass overwhelmed the shadows, bearing down upon him.

In an open doorway not unlike the entrance to a cave, they met Thano, a dark cloak wrapped over her gown. Arzhati was not with her, and nor had Zhanil expected to see him. Kargil assumed his place, standing at his mother's elbow with a scarf in his hand. "The custodians tell me there is much dust here," he said, offering her the cloth. "You should not breathe it in."

Turning to their guests, he added, "Our people have a better way. Our burials are out in the open, in great mounds where the gods can see them. My uncle Lazphi has a tomb near the city. We will ride there tomorrow, so you may see how splendid it is."

Our people. Zhanil did not fail to catch the distinction. *You are only half-Turya, Kargil*, he wanted to say, but did not think it would make any difference. In Kargil's mind, he was Turya, and nothing else mattered.

This was not Zhanil's first visit to a royal crypt. Under the temple of the Snake Mother, far below the place where the holy serpents were kept, catacombs stretched their multitudinous passages like fingers beneath the city streets. Each time a family member died, Zhanil accompanied the procession down into quiet dark, trying and failing to count the corridors with their niches. Fading murals emerged in the torchlight, marking the slabs behind which moldered generations of kings, queens, and their kin, the images sinking back into the shadows as the light passed. Tal Charne felt different. Its darkness encompassed a vast, open space, swallowing entire corners in cobwebs and a perpetual lack of light. Zhanil followed the twin lanterns down stairs and ramps, searching for walls where none existed; there was only the floor, thick with an inch of dust, and rows of sarcophagi. The pyramid's immense weight seemed to press inward, smothering visitors and dead alike in claustrophobic blackness.

As he passed, Zhanil spied effigies lying atop the sarcophagi, and glimpsed names remembered only as fading ink in the pages of old books.

Kargil came to the end of a row and stopped before a plain slab. "This is the place," he said. "Father tells me they were laid here together."

The guard who followed them brought forth the box and set it on the floor. Kargil signaled to him and Kalmeki, indicating positions around the sarcophagus. Several moments of straining and stirring the dust shifted the slab. Zhanil breathed in the dust, coughed, and choked again at the faint mildew of decay issuing from the open tomb.

Kalmeki rejoined him. "They are only bones," he whispered.

Retrieving the box, Kargil set it on the lip of the sarcophagus and unlocked it. "Zhanil, you must do the rest."

Zhanil swallowed and, with his uncle's steadying hand on his shoulder, stepped forward to peer into the box. Just as Kalmeki had promised, the skulls were clean, having been boiled and bleached white long ago; the only damage Zhanil saw were a pair of deep cuts gouged in the crown of one. With infinite care, and not a little hesitation, he lifted it out.

Kargil nodded. "That is Zhanil Brasides, your uncle," he said. "Father told me he was struck twice in the head before he died."

With his help, Zhanil moved to the side of the sarcophagus, bent down, and placed the skull with the correct body. Father and son had been laid in opposite directions to conserve space, and in the rotting blue silk cloth that covered them, Zhanil could see that the Turyar had given them royal honors.

Moving to the foot of the sarcophagus, he took his grandfather's head from Kargil's hands and laid it with its body. "I do not know the prayers said here in Rhodeen," he told Thano.

Pale and still, clearly affected by the scene before her, Thano shook her head. "They must be spoken by a priest of the Sun, and they have been forbidden to come here. A woman is technically not permitted to say the prayers for a male relative, but these are special circumstances, I think."

As Kargil and the other men maneuvered the sarcophagus lid back into position, Thano lifted her arms to invoke the eternal Sun. "Shining disk that watches over our House, bear our deceased brothers through the dark sea of Night into the west, and let them arise again in the east." She brought her hands down flat on the stone slab. "There are many other prayers and rituals, but I do not know them all. Some are only for the priests."

Greater levity followed them to the surface, allowing for some conversation. "There were other dead," said Zhanil.

Thano nodded. "I do not know where my brothers lie, but your uncle's wife and children rest together in Tal Sepha. Arzhati made certain I knew that, and he lets me visit once a year. I bring flowers for them, and offerings for my mother."

"I should not presume to ask any favors after this," whispered Zhanil, "but my father has long been troubled by their fate. I would like to put his mind at ease."

"Arzhati already knows," said Thano. "I cannot promise anything, but if the opportunity presents itself I will ask."

"Right now, I will be happy enough just breathing fresh air."

Not surprisingly, she laid a hand on his arm. "It is always thus," she said, "even for those who come here in daylight. Death does not know the difference.

* * * *

"All the warriors gathered here in mourning, so many that the earth was torn by their passing feet. They sacrificed twelve fine horses and a woman—"

"A woman?" asked Zhanil. In Khalgar, men were offered to the gods only in times of great duress, but Kargil in his boisterous narrative made it seem like nothing. "You made a human sacrifice?"

Kargil looked back at the high, green mound and shrugged. "She was a captive, and Lazphi had no wife, so in the next world she serves for him. My father and his warriors gave him goods and treasures, and commended him to the care of the Storm God."

Privately, Zhanil did not think much of the burial mound, except that it occupied a commanding view of the city and river valley. "Aren't you afraid that someone will plunder the tomb?"

"No one would dare do such a thing," replied Kargil. "My father means to be buried here, and I, too, will lie here when my time comes. Kanesh will keep us safe, and Turya vengeance will fall hard on any who fail to respect this sacred place."

"Wouldn't you rather be buried in the city?"

Kargil grimaced. "In that cold, unnatural place we visited last night? I think not. I told Mother, if the old rulers wanted to honor the Sun, they should have built their tombs where the Sun could protect them, in the daylight. No, the Turya way is the natural way."

"At Hapaniku," said Kalmeki, "they leave the corpses lying exposed for the vultures and the Earth Mother."

Agantine looked at him. "Do they truly do such a thing?"

Kalmeki nodded. "The dead are placed naked on platforms and left outside for forty days. What is left is then washed and buried in a mound near the stronghold. It is a very ancient custom, not practiced much anymore."

"My grandfather prefers the vulture way," said Kargil, "but if men possess the wit to bury their dead, then they should do so. His will be the last such burial, I think. New ways have come to Hapaniku and the Shedyar, and not all of it is good."

"That is what happens when two different peoples encounter each other," said Zhanil. "What you describe has happened here in Rhodeen, too."

Kargil turned, looking out at the valley below. "This is a rich land, good for growing food and raising horses; that is why my father and uncle led their warriors here. But it should be a strong and united land, a Turya nation. There is no longer any need for the old ways."

In studying him, noting his subtly mixed features, Zhanil wondered how he could truly believe such a thing. "Half your subjects might disagree with you."

"They might," agreed Kargil. "However, they live under our rule now. The common people are wise enough to see how much better their lives are now; it is the nobles who want things as they were. Father should have sent their sons to the Turya-lands to be fostered in our ways. Instead, he wants their approval and is too lenient with them."

Zhanil could not quite believe what he was hearing. "That does not sound like such a terrible thing. It seems to me that there's a time for conquest, and a time to make peace."

"They undermine his rule," said Kargil. "You would not understand this, living as you do in Khalgar."

As a cousin, Kargil was distant and strange, and Zhanil knew that as a brother-in-law he would be insufferable. Gazing down at the urban sprawl of Shemin-at-Khul, Zhanil shook his head, wishing that his cousin were more tolerant, more approachable. As the next *turkan* and king of Rhodeen, Kargil would be a despot, imposing Turya ways on those who did not want them, alienating subjects his father had tried so hard to placate.

Riding down from Lazphi's tomb, they had lunch in a tavern on the outskirts of the city. "The place is run by Rhodeen," said Kargil, "but they serve good food. The delicacies in this land would make a decent man's stomach turn: quail tongues, fish eggs, and goose liver, such things as my mother likes."

Zhanil appreciated the plainly dressed chicken that came off the spit, as well as the golden ale, but thought the meal would have gone down better without Kargil's comments. "Those dishes are popular in Khalgar, too," he said. "My mother is particularly fond of shellfish."

"I have seen the sea," replied Kargil. His expression told the rest. "A man needs only as much water as the Storm God wills. You see the river flowing there? It gives life to the land. It is sufficient."

What Zhanil saw was a broad waterway far more impressive than the Olev, which flowed near Bhellin. He saw flat-bottomed river barges, fishing coracles, and ducks floating in the reed-tangled shallows, and to his eyes, the Khul had beauty to match its usefulness.

Kargil was a man who could only admire a fine horse or a well-made bow. *More than likely*, Zhanil thought, *he is a terrible lover*.

Ellina isn't going to have anything to do with him, he decided.

A hand touched his arm. "Pardon, sir," said the server, an old man with a pockmarked face, "but your accent is from Khalgar."

Zhanil nodded over his ale. "Yes, I'm visiting from Bhellin."

"I heard them say your name before," continued the man. "*Zhanil* is royal, the 'little star.' I was wondering, sir, if—"

Even as he tensed, Zhanil caught Amset's warning look. "What can I do for you?" he asked cautiously.

The old man dropped a slight bow. "I wouldn't bother you, sir, but I was just wondering who your father is."

"We are eating," Kargil said sharply. "We want no interruptions."

"Leave him be," replied Zhanil, seizing the opportunity to vent some of his frustration. "He isn't asking you, and he certainly isn't bothering me. Good sir, my name is Zhanil Sephides. Might I ask your name?"

"I'm Eumos, sir." Now the old man was smiling, eagerly nodding his head. "Was your father Sephil Brasides, the young prince? I used to guard his door."

Agantine coughed delicately, reminding Zhanil that perhaps this was not the wisest conversation to be having, especially in front of Kargil. Zhanil gave a sharp nod to show that he understood. "Yes, that is my father," he replied.

"And he's alive and well, sir?"

"Yes, he and my mother are doing quite well. Would you like me to give him some greeting from you?"

Eumos clenched his hand over his heart. "Just knowing he's alive and well is enough, sir." The emotion that stood out in his voice made Zhanil shiver, for he could not imagine this old man would be so affected simply by the act of meeting him. "But if you have a moment, sir, just let him know that poor Eumos remembers him."

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Chapter Sixteen

"I had no complaints, Father," said Zhanil, "except for one thing."

Sephil, sitting across the breakfast table from him, lifted his gaze and frowned. "That is not what you told your grandfather."

"Because it didn't concern him," he replied. "It has to do with my lodgings."

"Were they inadequate?"

Zhanil shook his head. "No, they were more than sufficient. It's just that they gave me your old apartments."

He had meant to make a joke, to cast light on the dreadful opulence of the royal apartments, but the shadow that unexpectedly crossed Sephil's face made his jest suddenly illadvised. What had he said that was so troubling?

"Why would they do such a thing?" Sephil asked softly.

"Perhaps they thought I would bring more servants. I know Arzhati wanted to keep me from public view as much as possible," said Zhanil. To reassure his father, he quickly added, "Like I said, I had no complaints. I was just wondering about all the gaudy decoration. It doesn't seem like you at all."

Sephil's grim expression did not change. "I was not responsible for that," he answered. "My chief eunuch had execrable taste, and I was too young to know any better."

"I had a pleasant view of the city," said Zhanil. "I was able to see Tal Sepha from the terrace." "Agantine tells me you visited both pyramids."

Watching his father sip his morning tea, Zhanil was grateful his mother was not present. Ketalya would have cajoled her husband, or glossed over the matter entirely in order to make the conversation more pleasant. "The first time I visited Tal Charne for ritual purposes, at the behest of the *turkan*. The second time, I requested it."

"I was under the impression that the pyramids were forbidden," said Sephil.

Agantine clearly had not told him what had occurred, leaving that duty to Zhanil. "Arzhati wanted to make amends," Zhanil explained. "In order to do so, he needed to clear up a bit of unpleasantness. He would have preferred that you be there. It would have been fitting, but I went in your stead."

"Son, you are rambling."

"Because it *was* unpleasant," he said, "and unexpected. Your father and brother were buried in Tal Charne, except for their heads. Arzhati sent them to his father at Hapaniku. They were returned, and he gave them to me to place in the tomb. I went down there with Thano. We performed the rituals as best we could, but—" Once again he caught himself rambling. "I didn't know how to tell you, Father."

The silence which followed was the kind Zhanil most dreaded, the kind where he did not know what to expect next.

"Why does he make such a gesture now?" Sephil asked quietly. "What does it matter to him that he has my approval or friendship, unless he wants something?" With him, Zhanil had brought gifts from Rhodeen, including a bolt of pale blue silk for Ellina. Ketalya frowned when she saw it, and withheld the gift even after Zhanil explained that Thano sent it so as not to exclude anyone. He would have liked to mention the proposed marriage, but took Agantine's advice and said nothing, knowing the matter was for his grandfather to consider and decide. Agantine promised to discuss the situation with Ampheres, and no doubt he would have access to the king, considering that he carried Arzhati's personal gift, a magnificent bow and matching quiver of arrows.

"He wants to make peace for his son's sake," replied Zhanil. "To be honest, it's a waste of time. Kargil doesn't care what his father's Rhodeen subjects think, and he might as well have been born and raised in the Turya-lands for all the interest he shows in his mother's heritage."

Sephil nodded. "What does Thano have to say about that?" "She loves her son, but seems blind to his faults," said Zhanil. "I'm only speaking for myself, but there were a few times when I would have liked to knock him on his ass. I wouldn't want to be living in Rhodeen the day Arzhati dies and he takes over."

In fact, Kalmeki had mentioned that succession was not automatic among Turya rulers. Dynasties were still a foreign concept among them, and any *turkan's* son who hoped to assume his father's title had to be a grown warrior of sound body acclaimed by a council of Turya elders. The possibility existed that they would decide Kargil was too young or otherwise lacking. Zhanil smiled at the thought, but knew better than to pin his hopes on an obscure law. Arzhati had gone to Rhodeen and taken a bride of the old blood to found a dynasty; he would not die without ensuring the succession.

"I did see someone else in Rhodeen," said Zhanil, suddenly recalling the incident. "We went riding outside the city and stopped to eat at a roadside tavern. The proprietor was an old man with a pockmarked face named Eumos. He said he remembered you."

Sephil stared at him. "My old guard, *that* Eumos? I did not think he was still alive. I assumed he died during the invasion."

"He didn't explain how he survived," replied Zhanil, "but he seemed quite moved when he learned whose son I was. I told him I would convey his best wishes to you and Mother."

After breakfast, Zhanil returned to his apartments, where Alassil supervised the unpacking, and then visited with his sister, who remained cross with their mother for confiscating Thano's gift.

"She says I will be spoiled," complained Ellina. "I do not see how, since she hardly lets me have anything. It was such pretty silk, too."

Yes, but you wouldn't have liked the man who went with it. "When you are grown, you can have all the silks and jewels you can afford," said Zhanil. "And you never said anything about the gift *I* brought you. Am I to assume you did not like it?"

Ellina hugged him. "Now you are just playing with me. I said thank you twice, and I know you heard me."

"Ah, but a silver charm cannot compete with the finest silk from Cassiare, is that it?"

"Mother should not make me pen a thank-you letter for a gift I cannot keep."

Zhanil playfully kissed her cheek. "One day I am sure she will let you have it. That really is not her shade of blue, anyway."

"I wish you did not have to go back into the army," said Ellina.

"There is no better place for keeping a young prince out of trouble. Would you like me to send you a spare uniform for a present?"

The orders he had expected upon his return had not yet arrived, prompting Zhanil to wonder how serious his grandfather was about his military post. Neither Alassil nor Nahar could tell him anything, and Adeja had not yet returned from his current assignment.

"He seems content," said Alassil, "on those few occasions when he stays here. At least, he is not troublesome."

A message arrived the following morning, yet where Zhanil expected his orders, he saw it was a formal summons from the king, who wanted to see him immediately. He had just enough time to dress and comb his hair before a vizier came for him.

Seated behind his desk, Ampheres raised a bemused eyebrow at his casual appearance. "Perhaps I should have requested that you wear the Turya coat I heard you received. I hear you cut quite the elegant figure in it."

Agantine must have said something. "It is still packed among the luggage, sir."

"It seems you quite enjoyed your trip to Rhodeen."

Zhanil knew his grandfather had not summoned him to exchange pleasantries. "You wished to see me, sir?"

"Sit down, boy," said Ampheres, indicating the chair in front of Zhanil. "No doubt you are wondering about your appointment. I have it right here, but first I wish to ask you about your trip."

"It was pleasant and relatively uneventful," replied Zhanil.

Again, his grandfather lifted his brow. "You are assuming I am interested in hearing about banquets and hunting parties. Agantine has already told me that you met Lord Kargil, and that you were not entirely impressed."

Reluctant to anticipate Ampheres a second time and risk his temper, Zhanil could only nod.

"Now tell me, exactly what do you find so objectionable about this young man?"

What did Agantine tell him that he questions my judgment so? Zhanil cleared his throat, using the interval to frame a suitable reply. "He is cold and inflexible, and has no interest in anything other than traditional Turya ways."

"I was under the impression that you were fond of the Turyar," replied Ampheres.

"My opinion of Kargil has nothing to do with that. He is half-Turya, and will one day inherit a kingdom whose people are mixed Turyar and Rhodeen. His father has tried hard to strike a balance between them, imposing Turya laws while respecting the native population. Kargil wants to undo all that," explained Zhanil. "He sees Rhodeen as nothing more than an extension of the Turya-lands."

Ampheres nodded, his expression yielding no hint of his private thoughts. "Your uncle assures me of your discretion in dealing with your parents. It would be premature to alarm them, given that Ellina is still several years away from any marriage."

"I do not like keeping secrets from them, sir."

"You are assuming that something will come of this," said Ampheres, "or that this is an unusual situation. I have received offers of marriage for your sister since she was ten years old, but as these arrangements were not suitable, I said nothing. When the time comes, Ellina will make a profitable marriage."

"I am not so much interested in profit as in the choice of partner," answered Zhanil. "I realize Kargil has much to offer in terms of an alliance, but I do not intend to sit here and grit my teeth while he makes her miserable."

Watching his grandfather's jaw clench and lips compress into a thin line, he realized his outburst was unwise, as well as unbecoming for a royal prince. "She can refuse him," he added.

"Foolish boy," growled Ampheres. "Do you honestly think I would treat your sister, my own grandchild, like a pawn on a chessboard? Give me some credit for taking her feelings into consideration. Kargil may be heir to a kingdom, but if he lacks good character, then that is the end of the matter.

"At the moment, I am more concerned with your future. I do not think I have to tell you I do not like it that Lord Kalmeki has returned with you, however much your uncle has explained that it was not your doing."

"I assure you, sir, my conduct with him has been-"

"It better have been, boy, or we will all hear about it. For the time being, Kalmeki will remain in the Turya embassy while you go to Mettos. When you return, we can discuss options for your future marriage. It is not too early to begin negotiating a suitable bride for you."

Zhanil shook his head. "Sir, I have no desire to marry right now."

"You do far too much arguing, boy," snapped Ampheres, "and you should know by now that what a prince wants is of little consequence. If you were merely a junior prince, you could remain a bachelor as long as you liked, but you are not. Your bloodline must continue. You know this."

"Yes, sir," Zhanil replied sullenly.

Ampheres pushed a packet across the desk toward him. "We will find you a suitable woman, one who has all her teeth and wits about her. Now then, these are your orders. You are to report in two days to the address given. This should give you sufficient time to arrange your affairs."

Zhanil did not bother to point out that he had been ready to depart almost as soon as he arrived home from Rhodeen. Taking the packet, he bowed and left the room to go find his father.

Sephil had not yet gone to the sanctuary. "I can see the subject of marriage does not sit well with you," he said when Zhanil voiced his frustration.

"I know I have to get married at some point, but I wasn't expecting it quite so soon."

"I was not much older than you when I married your mother."

"Grandfather jokes about my bride having all her teeth and some intelligence," said Zhanil. Sometimes I wonder if he really *is* joking. I think he really might saddle me with a plain, witless girl, just to teach me my place."

Much to his dismay, his father smiled. "Looks are one thing, but I doubt very much that your grandfather would tolerate a simpleton. He certainly would not want to bring such qualities into the royal bloodline."

"We're talking about marriage, not horse breeding," grumbled Zhanil. "And yes, I realize that the two are somewhat alike."

"Then you will not be surprised and forget your manners when your grandfather begins introducing you to eligible young ladies at court," said Sephil. "At least you will have more choice than I did. I was limited to your mother and your Aunt Lissan. Fortunately, they were both agreeable. Now stop sulking and enjoy yourself these last two days. If your military service lasts the usual term, it will be five years before you have to think about marriage."

Kalmeki took a more sympathetic approach. "Turya families may try to arrange a union for their children, but never with strangers. A man will not offer gifts to a woman he does not know, and she will not accept them."

After a day spent riding and hunting in the nearby hills, they retired to enjoy a comfortable dinner in Zhanil's apartment, making certain that observers noticed their platonic interaction. While he realized that being seen alone with Kalmeki was potentially not the wisest course, Zhanil balanced his caution with his growing awareness of the bond between them. Whether he would have felt the same had Arzhati not applied the *keshka* label and its attendant customs to his feelings, he did not know, only that the prospect of Kalmeki's absence brought an uneasy ache.

"What about you?" he asked. "You've told me before how you feel about sex, but have you ever thought about marriage?"

"Every Turya man thinks about marrying," replied Kalmeki, "whether he wants to or not. Leaving home has given me time to put off marriage, but even I know that one day I will have to return and take a bride. It would be considered unnatural if I did not."

"Gods, this talk depresses me even more than the prospect of spending the next five years in the army." *Away from you*, he wanted to add, but he was not about to become sentimental. "Let's forget about it for now."

"I should not keep you up too late," said Kalmeki.

Zhanil frowned over his wine. "Do you honestly think I'm going to get that much sleep tonight? I'll be awake half the night whether you stay or go."

Kalmeki gave him a hard look. "Are you certain this is wise?"

"Wise, no," replied Zhanil, "but I really don't care. I'm leaving tomorrow, and I don't know when I'll return. It could be months, or even years before I see you again." Setting down his cup, he stood and circled the table. He prodded Kalmeki's thighs apart until he could wedge a leg between them and lower himself onto the man's lap. "My grandfather criticizes me no matter what I do, so tonight I'm going to do as I damned well please."

As he leaned forward, bracing his upper body on the back of the chair, Kalmeki grasped his arms to hold him still. "I have said this before: you are too reckless to have ever lived in the Turya-lands."

Zhanil brushed his lips over Kalmeki's, teasing him with his warm breath and the promise of more. "And I told you then: we're not *in* the fucking Turya-lands."

"With some things, it does not matter." Kalmeki tentatively returned the kiss. "Were you not leaving tomorrow, I would say no, but I do not know when you will return."

Grinding down on Kalmeki's hard thigh, Zhanil moved in for a deep, long kiss. *Just admit it*, he thought. *You want to fuck just as much as I do*. He let his mouth graze his lover's cheek, his tongue dance over and around Kalmeki's earlobe. "I thought about bringing a boy in here, to share, but I know how you don't like such things.

Kalmeki, his breathing ragged, dragged his lips down Zhanil's chin to drizzle kisses along his throat. "You would have been wasting your time."

Zhanil's fingers found and loosened the top button of Kalmeki's tunic. "I think *we're* wasting time talking about it."

Only Alassil and Amset were within earshot, and neither made any comment as Zhanil led Kalmeki from the dining room to his bedchamber. Once the door was safely closed, they undressed with the least ceremony, flinging clothes to the floor, over furniture, and in corners. All that mattered were their naked bodies and the heat between them, begging release. Tender words and love-play could come later, or not at all.

"That night in the bath wasn't enough," confessed Zhanil, reaching for the cock rubbing up against his belly. "Watching you make yourself come only made it worse."

"It was your idea. I would have taken my bath later and spared you the agony." Kalmeki's hands cupped his buttocks, squeezing them. "You always make things worse for yourself."

"You didn't seem to be in any great hurry to leave."

Zhanil dropped to his knees, his mouth seeking the ridged underside of his partner's cock, the inviting slit peeking out from the foreskin. He licked up and down, ignoring the heat in his own groin as Kalmeki twined grasping fingers in his hair and slowly began to thrust his hips.

"No, we should do it together."

Before he could protest that he was enjoying himself just fine, Kalmeki pulled him up and urged him toward the bed. He let his lover position them head to foot so they could take mutual pleasure in each other, but with an insistent tongue now probing the length of his cock, Zhanil found it difficult to continue what he had begun.

"Am I distracting you?" asked Kalmeki. Zhanil felt his question as a hot, moist exhalation against his cock, followed by a pointed tongue delving into his slit.

"Yes, you're a terrible distraction. Keep doing it."

That tongue swept down the underside of his cock to swirl over and tease his balls. Zhanil groaned, and set about giving as good as he got. Drawing back the foreskin, he slid his lover's crown between his lips and began to suck, avoiding the shaft altogether.

His efforts were rewarded by muffled moans, and punished by a fist that closed around his shaft and began to stroke, pulling and squeezing, alternating fast stimulation with slow and frustrating his attempts to settle into a rhythm. Reaching down, he grasped Kalmeki's wrist. "Give it to me hard," he growled.

Kalmeki did not yield. "As soon as you do the same."

Zhanil conceded the game, giving Kalmeki the pleasure he wanted, fighting to maintain the pace even as he shuddered and groaned in orgasm. A moment later, he felt Kalmeki's cock pulse and contract in his hand. Beads of semen landed on his chin and throat, and he heard a strangled cry. With his lips, he nuzzled the softening cock, venturing a small taste.

Lassitude urged him to remain in that position; he stirred long enough to sit up, wipe himself clean, and climb under the blankets, where he lay with his head pillowed on Kalmeki's chest. "You're going to miss me, you know," he murmured.

"Perhaps," said Kalmeki.

"Now you're playing with me." Zhanil kissed his collarbone, dropping down to toy briefly with his nipples. "I've been wondering, was there ever anybody in the Turya-lands?"

Kalmeki fondled his shoulder. "No, but that does not mean that I was not interested or that I did not look. I used to watch the other warriors and wonder what was wrong with me, if it was normal to feel more desire for them than for women. Finally, I confided in one of the wise women."

"And she didn't tell anyone?"

"What happens with a man in her bed is a secret thing. Had I not known this, I would not have dared speak to her," replied Kalmeki. "Of course, she told me it was not natural, and to give more attention to making love with women. I did not speak of it again until I met you."

Zhanil smiled. "Perhaps the gods were saving you for me." "That is an odd thing for you to say."

"It has only been eight weeks, Kalmeki," answered Zhanil. "I might not be sentimental, but I do sometimes believe in fate. I know I keep knocking myself over the head for being so foolish, going blindly into Rhodeen, but the things that have happened since then have made me wonder just how much was destiny, and how much my own stupidity. Didn't you tell me that when I came to Meduin, you'd only just arrived?"

"There was no position for me in Khul," said Kalmeki, "so I accepted a post in Meduin. With the raids, there is always work for a Turya warrior."

Propping himself up on one elbow, Zhanil looked down at him. As always, Kalmeki remained unreadable. "And do you think it was fate that I offended you so badly that you had to come here to Bhellin to get an answer out of me?"

Now Kalmeki reacted, his lips curving in a slight smile. "That might have been fate," he said, "or perhaps, as you say, your own stupidity. Only the gods know for certain." * * * *

"You will be confined to the grounds for six weeks, the normal training period. If I did not already know that, your grandfather has taken pains to remind me of the fact," said the captain, looking resentful. "Of course, I need not tell you that you will not get royal privileges from me or anyone else, and you will not be granted leave to return to the capital unless the king himself sends for you."

Where Zhanil had come expecting an infantry post, upon his arrival at Tacumé he was sent with his horse to the compound where the cavalry units were stationed. Only when Crastin, his commanding officer, came to see him, did he receive an explanation. "Plenty of princes and noblemen cut their teeth in places like Medás, but the infantry is an ass-end career, and there is no way your grandfather is going to let his offspring become frontline fodder if it comes to war."

Men in the cavalry corps provided their own horses, and paid for their stabling and upkeep out of their own wages. With such expenses, Zhanil found that his fellow soldiers came from good families who were either accustomed to dealing with princes, or claimed royal descent themselves. Other than this, the lodgings and uniforms were identical to those found at Medás, and the discipline just as strict.

"You are not in the academy," said Crastin. "Whatever rank you earn here, you earn by merit, not birth. Expect to work hard."

Zhanil felt fortunate to have chosen a good horse to ride from Bhellin, though he found the first fortnight rougher than he expected. After so many months away from the military, he had become accustomed to soft living, sleeping late, and exercising as he saw fit. Returning to regimented life was in many ways more excruciating the second time around.

Each morning, he rose before first light and ran a mile over a soft sand track on an empty stomach. After breakfast, he drilled with sword and spear on foot before going through the same paces with his horse. If he had to learn a new discipline, then his mount had to do the same, adjusting to commands and practicing in formation until they learned to work flawlessly together.

Although Zhanil never specifically mentioned it, everyone knew he was the king's grandson. No one, however, chided him for talking about his family, since he spoke in only the most general terms, omitting titles and references to court ceremony. Others did the same, glossing over lineages and connections with such haste it suggested embarrassment.

Like other newcomers, Zhanil received no mail during his initial training, and no letter from his family could have told him what he most wished to know. Kalmeki remained in the Turya embassy, quietly attending to business alongside Nesha, yet Zhanil occasionally wondered what he was doing, or what he would say about the drills. Probably very little, for what Zhanil saw did not resemble what he knew about the Turyar.

Among the cavalry units, he saw no archers, as this was considered an infantry function. As a soldier stripped of his royal prerogatives, Zhanil was in no position to ask pointed questions about tactics or tasks. His sole outlet came in conversation with his fellow soldiers, in which he casually mentioned that he had seen Turyar shoot from horseback. "They're extremely accurate, and from a great distance."

"My grandfather fought them at Sufhír," said Eddar, who had the cot beside his. "They might have a fierce reputation, but on the battlefield they don't have much organization."

"Their strength is in speed and confusion," added Agan, whose cot was across from theirs.

"I've heard their style is based on hunting techniques they use on the steppes." Zhanil treated his knowledge as rumor, as he did not know how any of these men would respond to the idea of his having a Turya friend. Old hostilities died hard in certain quarters.

Agan frowned at them. "How do you know so much? No one's ever been to the Turya-lands." He was a dour man whose perpetual skepticism made him seem older than he actually was. After five weeks, Zhanil had yet to see him smile.

"There are plenty of Turyar living in Rhodeen," said Zhanil, "and they've been sending ambassadors to Bhellin for at least ten years now." Since it would draw attention to his royal rank, he did not mention his trip to Shemin-at-Khul. "They want good relations with Khalgar."

"Try telling that to my grandfather and his brother," snorted Agan. "They swear they'll be dead before they have civil words with any Turya."

Kalmeki once said that, despite his manners, not everyone in Bhellin responded kindly to him. "They do not see a man, but a Turya, a thing of fear. We are not so far from our days of raiding and killing as many of us wish."

At the time, Zhanil had not known what to say or how to comfort him. Perhaps the only consolation was time, as the generations passed, their bitter memories fading into insignificance.

Summer in Mettos offered a milder alternative to the stifling heat he could have expected at Medás. With the sea only thirty miles away, marine haze blanketed the land until midmorning, and night brought cool breezes and occasional fog. During an unpleasant drill or a bit of dull leisure time, Zhanil reflected on the comforts he might have been enjoying with his family at the summer palace in Adenna: swimming, fishing, and basking in freedom from court life. Bringing Kalmeki along might have been difficult to arrange, but he would have tried, if only to honor his promise to teach the man to swim.

I'll bet he's never seen the sea, or sailed in a boat. Zhanil closed his eyes, picturing the scene: Kalmeki standing on the beach, wary of the crashing surf and the endless, rolling water, finally agreeing to take off his shoes and wade out to his ankles.

However much he might daydream or wish, in the end Zhanil knew his grandfather never would have allowed it. *I understand his reasons, which are just good common sense*. Turning his head, he opened his eyes and looked at the narrow window slit, dark in the deepening twilight, and wondered why it was that with Kalmeki he could never seem to keep a sensible head on his shoulders.

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Chapter Seventeen

"This is not how we do things here," said Crastin. "When a man comes here, he stays here until he is posted elsewhere or completes his term of enlistment. You get leave twice a year, but that is all."

Seated on a rough chair in the commander's office, Zhanil waited to hear what his offense was. To the best of his recollection, he had not spoken of leaving, or even mentioned summers spent at Adenna. "Yes, I understand," he replied.

Crastin pointed a thick finger at him. "You are not the problem, Zhanil. Your grandfather, on the other hand, seems to think the military is some kind of nursery from which he can pluck his offspring at will. He knows I object to this policy, and for the record, I would refuse if the circumstances were different. However, I am informed that this matter is an urgent one."

It has only been ten weeks. What could possibly be so important? "He wants to see me?"

"Men have arrived to escort you back to the capital."

Zhanil tensed, suddenly wary of the packet Crastin held out to him. "My family isn't in Bhellin," he said. "They spend summers at Adenna."

Crastin dropped the folded parchment on the table in front of him. "This is stamped with the royal seal, and the men are wearing the royal livery. My orders are that it is a matter of state and a royal command, so for me to refuse and allow you to remain would be treason. Since it is so late in the day, you will stay the night, but you must be on the road first thing tomorrow."

Having brought few things, it did not take Zhanil long to pack. He needed more time to explain to his mates, who hovered around his cot as he emptied his foot locker. "I don't know what's going on or why I have to return," he said. The sealed missive remained in his pocket; he did not want to read it with them looking on, for they would expect him to share its contents, and without knowing what it contained, he was not certain that was wise.

Outside the mess, he met his escort. He did not recognize Ninhás, the captain, or the six men with him, nor did the captain's gruff manner encourage him. "Has there been any word on why I am to return?" he asked.

"I have my orders," said Ninhás, "and that is all."

Zhanil withdrew to a corner with the missive, wondering why neither Amset nor Nahar had come to fetch him. With his dagger, he broke the seal and unfolded the parchment, holding it up to the lantern light.

Rather than the official orders he anticipated, the packet contained a brief letter signed by his father: "We realize this is very sudden, but it is imperative that you obey. These seven men will escort you back to the city. We cannot spare your regular guards for fear they might draw attention to you. Ride quickly and speak to no one."

The cautionary, urgent tone did not sound like Sephil; the signature was his, but that was all. Zhanil reread the letter, recognizing the handwriting as that of his father's steward Delav, but could not fathom the message itself. If his family was not in Adenna, then something was wrong, something his father dared not put into writing.

"All right, what is going on in the capital?" he asked Ninhás. "The royal family should be at the summer palace this time of year."

The captain looked intently at him, as if to say: *I already answered that question*. "I do not know, sir. My orders were simply to find you and bring you back safely."

In short, Ninhás and his men were precisely the dull, blindly obedient type of soldiers who aggravated him. "You're not inspiring my confidence here, you know."

"Sir, if I had information, I would tell you," replied Ninhás.

Zhanil spent half the night lying awake on his cot, puzzling over his family's uncharacteristic actions. What had happened that they had to remain in the capital and withhold his regular guards? Who was threatening them to such an extent that they had to send for him, and yet feared drawing attention to him?

Tajhaan was the only enemy with the resources to cause serious trouble, but if they wanted to strike at him, why had their agents gone to Bhellin? Why would they strike at the rest of the royal family while leaving him untouched in Mettos? It made no sense, and the more Zhanil pondered the question, the less inclined he was to return home.

Before dawn, he rose and donned his uniform, a move which drew criticism from Crastin. "You are technically on leave," he said, "which means you should be in plain clothes."

Zhanil buckled his sword belt in place. "I'm not going on holiday, sir, and I've no idea what danger awaits at home.

Plain clothes will only make me more visible." He did not want to have to pull rank to remain in uniform, or leave Tacumé on bad terms with Crastin, but as far as he was concerned, the matter was not up for debate. "No one has been able to give me any information, so I really don't have any choice."

Crastin, who never condoned any breach of protocol, said nothing, implying his grudging consent with a grunt and shake of the head. Zhanil mounted his horse, rode past the sandy track around which his mates were running, and joined his escort. Ninhás offered no greeting other than a brief nod of acknowledgement.

If he meant to lead me out into the wilderness and harm me, he'd do everything he could to get me to trust him, thought Zhanil, clenching his hands around his reins. He'd be talkative, even unctuous.

Idle talk and oily compliments would have set his teeth on edge, but to his dismay he found that silence offered no more reassurance. *Ninhás could cut my throat anyway, and tell everyone in Bhellin that we were set upon by raiders. Father did not write the letter. He might not even know about it.*

Where his escort started down the road, he paused by the gates, not knowing what he should do. After a moment, Ninhás stopped and turned in the saddle. "Is something wrong, sir?"

"Who gave you your orders?"

Ninhás frowned, clearly not understanding. "My commanding officer gave me the order."

Zhanil rode up to him. "So you never spoke to my father?"

"I never said I did, sir. I have nothing to do with royalty. I was told to come fetch you and bring you back to Bhellin with all haste, but at this rate it does not look like we are going anywhere."

Can an assassin be so bland, so unimaginative? Adeja would know, but he isn't here. "It seems I might be safer riding on alone," said Zhanil.

Comprehension slowly lit the captain's gaze. "My commission is to see you safely back to the capital, sir. If you get injured or killed, it is a court martial for me and no pay for my men. I heard something that the royal family feared assassins, but from a fellow soldier—"

"You said nothing about assassins last night."

"I do not pass on rumors as reliable information, sir," replied Ninhás.

"Then tell me for my amusement," said Zhanil.

Ninhás nodded. "If it will get you to cooperate, then yes, sir, but seeing your reluctance to trust a simple captain of the guard, I do not know that it would be wise. There is talk of a threat from abroad—"

"From Tajhaan?"

"Do you want me to tell the tale, sir, or do you already know it?"

He is a soldier following orders, nothing more. "You can tell me as we ride on ahead," said Zhanil. "How much ground were you told to cover each day?"

"We are to be in the capital within three days." Ninhás nudged his horse into a brisk walk, leaving Zhanil to follow. "And yes, sir, I have heard the threat is from Tajhaan, and

that they have assassins and spies all over the city, but this is a rumor, mind you, and rumors only make people afraid."

Zhanil made no response. As he already knew, sometimes rumors turned out to be true. Without doubt, this would be one of those occasions.

* * * *

After eight uneventful months escorting recruits, supplies, and mail to various strongholds throughout Khalgar, Adeja felt mixed relief at returning to his old post. An honorary army post was good enough, even if he had to restrain the occasional urge to knock a conceited young recruit over the head, and he knew Sephil had lobbied hard enough to win him the assignment, but his spirits craved action, his talents the chaos of a royal household under threat.

That he got his wish proved a dubious blessing. While the activity kept his mind too busy to reflect on the disillusionment of the past year, he hated to see Sephil under so much strain, especially since it was no longer safe for him to leave the palace for the comparative quiet of the sanctuary.

"I could pray here," said Sephil, gesturing to his private study, "as long as I knew Zhanil was safe."

"You should have let me ride out to get him."

Sephil shook his head. "I would have, but the king was right to send regular soldiers. You would attract too much attention. If Zhanil remembers to wear his uniform, he might slip in unnoticed, for all the good that will do him. It is no safer here than in Mettos, and perhaps less so."

Adeja resisted the urge to place a familiar hand on his shoulder. "Your household doesn't seem to be danger right now."

"Once he comes home, it will be," replied Sephil. "Delav sent him a message telling him to come immediately, but nothing more. He has no idea what has been happening here."

"Do you want to move his accommodations here to your apartments?"

Sephil seemed to struggle with the decision, and Adeja could easily see why. Though not the only one, even in absentia Zhanil had become a target. Any attempt on his life could spill over and injure his mother or sister, who had not yet been threatened. "Don't worry about it. I can find somewhere safe for him."

Whatever preparations Adeja intended, they were not ready when Zhanil arrived, travel-stained and exhausted, two hours later. While Zhanil had possessed enough sense to stay in uniform to avoid detection, no one had told the prince anything; his greeting was undercut with a dozen urgent questions whose answers he should have received on the road.

"Enough," Adeja said sharply. "I can see you're tired and that no one's given you any information, but you can't go back to your apartments. It's probably the most dangerous place for you right now."

Weariness and stress had clearly worn away Zhanil's patience. "Delav's note said my regular guard couldn't be

spared for fear of being noticed. I can see how you might raise suspicion, but had you sent Amset or Nahar—"

Adeja put up a hand to hush him. "I couldn't do that. Amset is with his son right now, and Nahar—I don't like to be the one to have to tell you this. He was one of the first to be attacked. Someone slashed his throat in the courtyard just below your apartments. I'm sorry, Zhanil."

The color drained from Zhanil's face. "Why would they attack him? I wasn't even here."

"It goes further than that," answered Adeja. "There have been attacks all over the palace. Starting with your household, Amhir was badly beaten by unknown assailants and left for dead, one of your servants was pushed down a flight of stairs, and your cook was injured by an attacker posing as a spit boy. Your parents and sister have not been harmed, but your Uncle Agantine's steward was strangled, two of your Aunt Lissan's ladies poisoned, and your Uncle Ettarin accosted outside the council chambers. Dozens of servants and guards have also been killed or injured. I've already sent Lahis to stay with her family, and sent word to Arjuna to stay away."

Zhanil tried twice to speak, both times unsuccessfully, before sinking down in a chair. "It's Tajhaan that's doing this, isn't it?"

"We managed to capture one of the assailants, but he had little information to offer," said Adeja. "They're all working independently, receiving payment from a middleman who can't be traced. But yes, it's clear that Tajhaan is behind the attacks. Reports from abroad say their troops are mustering at Dhahar on Rhodeen's southern border. It looks like they're getting ready to invade."

Spying a servant in the doorway, Adeja snapped his fingers and pointed to a decanter of wine on the sideboard. The man looked at Zhanil, recognized him, and at once poured him a drink.

"Taste it first," said Adeja.

"I wash linens, sir," answered the man, setting the glass down on the table beside Zhanil's chair. "I don't taste food or drink."

Adeja seized him by the ear, twisting until the man cried out in pain. "If you offer the prince a drink, you taste it first."

"Let him go," said Zhanil.

With one hand clasped to his ear, the servant glanced over at the prince. Adeja wondered if Zhanil would simply send the man away. "You have to take precautions, especially now. Someone has to taste your food and drink."

Zhanil turned to the man. "Do as he says."

"But sir, I—"

Adeja placed a hand on his dagger, sliding it from its sheath just enough so the man understood. He took the glass, lifted it shakily to his lips, and drank. Still trembling, he set it down and waited.

Five minutes later, nothing had happened. Zhanil thanked and dismissed the man, then took the drink he so badly needed. "I hated doing that, Adeja."

"I know, but it's necessary."

"I want to see my father. I also want to send a message to the Turya embassy."

Adeja had learned enough from Amset and Alassil to know exactly who Zhanil wished to contact, and why. While he thought little of the trip to Rhodeen and its stated purpose, his disapproval paled in comparison to his opinion of the Turya-sanctioned bond between Zhanil and Kalmeki. "I'm not certain you should involve outsiders at this point."

Exhaustion soured Zhanil's tongue. "I'm not asking Kalmeki here to fuck him," he snapped. "I need an official favor from the Turya embassy. Send somebody you trust to bring him, and tell him it's urgent."

"What are you planning?" asked Adeja.

"You'll see when he gets here," said Zhanil. "First I want to wash and see my father, to let him know I've arrived safely."

A year ago, Zhanil would have told him everything. For a prince to keep his own counsel was not necessarily a bad thing, and in such times it might even be the wisest course, but Adeja could not help but suspect that this was a permanent change.

He's not your son, and you've really no business asking questions beyond what he thinks you need to know. Taking his leave, Adeja went to find a messenger before inspecting the day's parcels and deliveries from the city market. Gods, what do you expect? He's not a child anymore, and even your own son keeps secrets from you.

Still, it stung.

* * * *

"Has the High Prince gone mad?" asked Zhanil. "He's about to invade Rhodeen and he threatens us at the same time? Is he trying to provoke war on two fronts? He can't possibly have that strong an army."

Sephil sat quietly, his face seamed by worry lines Zhanil had never seen before. "Your grandfather believes Tajhaan is trying to intimidate us into not siding with the Turyar when the invasion comes. All I can tell you for certain is that Armajid's tactic is having the opposite effect. The king is outraged by the threat to his family."

"So when Tajhaan marches on Rhodeen, we will also march?"

"Your grandfather has already called in regiments from Medás, Sufhír and Tacumé, and sent a sword to Arzhati. I was present in the council chambers when he showed the *turkan's* bow to his lords as a symbol of alliance," answered Sephil. "So yes, he means to respond with force. However, if by 'we' you mean that *you* will join the march, then no."

Recalling Crastin's words, that the king treated the military as a nursery for his wayward offspring, Zhanil was not surprised. On the other hand, he had not endured months of training simply to stay at home while others risked their lives on the battlefield. *I am not a child, and this threat is directed at me as much as anyone, maybe more. If it comes to war, I have a right to be there*. "I assume Grandfather isn't going to lead the army himself?"

Sephil frowned at him. "Do I detect ambition on your part?"

"It was a practical question," replied Zhanil. "He led the army at the Irrend Pass fifty years ago. I simply want to know if he's going to take the field this time, too."

"No, of course not," said Sephil. "Ettarin will lead the march south. I see the look in your eyes, son, and I am telling you that neither I nor your grandfather will allow you to go."

Zhanil gripped the armrest of his chair, biting back his response for the moment it took him to realize he could not remain silent. "If my regiment is called to march, then I have to join them. My orders weren't rescinded."

"I will see to it that they are."

The entrance of a servant announcing Kalmeki's arrival truncated the conversation, preventing Zhanil from arguing his case. "We'll discuss this later, Father. For now, I want you to receive Kalmeki and hear what I have to say."

From the look his father gave him, Zhanil knew he did not approve of the Turya ambassador's appearance. With visitors, however, Sephil was nothing but cordial, and nodded for the servant to escort Kalmeki into the room.

When his lover appeared, filling the doorway with his presence, Zhanil had to smother the temptation to go to him. Instead, he rose from his chair, offering it to Kalmeki while pulling over another for his own use. "I'm glad you came," he said.

Kalmeki walked into the room, but did not sit. "You are still in uniform. Have you only just returned?"

"It was a long ride from Mettos, and I can tell you all about it later, but right now I have an urgent request to make of you," replied Zhanil. "Please, sit down. You're so tall my father will get a crick in his neck staring up at you like that." Nodding at Sephil, Kalmeki accepted the chair. "Your messenger said it was an official request. This, then, is a state matter and not a personal one?"

"Zhanil," Sephil said softly, "what is going on?"

"I will explain. Kalmeki, have you heard about the attacks on the royal household?"

"Yes, but what I have heard are little more than rumors."

"Many people are dead," said Zhanil, "including my bodyguard Nahar. Others have been injured or terrorized. Fortunately, my parents and sister have not been harmed, but I am concerned for their safety. I know my father would rather take refuge in the sanctuary of Abh, except that it offers no defense. What I want to know is if the Turya embassy will provide safe haven if it becomes necessary."

Sephil cleared his throat. "Son, we have not discussed this matter, and I do not think it prudent or polite to impose on foreign ambassadors."

"You desire sanctuary for your mother and sister?" asked Kalmeki.

"And my father also, if he will accept it."

"Lord Kalmeki," said Sephil, "thank you for coming, but—" "There is something you need to know, Father." Zhanil waited until he had Sephil's attention before continuing. "Grandfather and Agantine both advised me against saying anything, as they felt it would be premature, but Arzhati and his wife want an alliance with our family. They want Ellina to marry Kargil."

Sephil stared at him in cold silence. "When," he finally asked, "did you intend to tell me this?"

"Like I said, I was told it was premature, and that it wasn't my place to get involved," replied Zhanil. "I told Grandfather how I felt about Kargil, and I said as much to you as I dared. I realize how you feel about the Turyar, but if it comes to it and there's no other refuge, I want you to send Ellina to the Turya embassy. Mother, too, if she will go. They will be safe there."

"When you spent more than an hour telling me how much you dreaded seeing Kargil as the next king and *turkan*, you expect me to place your sister in his custody?" Nostrils flaring, Sephil set his jaw. "Or worse, you would have me drop her in his lap as an unwilling bride?"

"Would you care to see the alternative?" answered Zhanil. "I would rather see Ellina in Turya hands than killed or made a prisoner in Tajhaan. Do you want to ask Adeja what they would do with her?" With a quick glance, he appealed to Kalmeki, quietly urging him to say something.

Kalmeki betrayed no emotion, yet his words offered the succor Zhanil craved. "The *turkan* is a friend to your house, so he will offer protection to you and your women if you so desire, Prince Sephil. Our embassy is well-guarded. Only Turyar are employed there, and they cannot be bought. Of course, neither Nesha nor I would presume to advise you at this point, but should you require aid, send word to one of us."

"Thank you," Sephil said stiffly, "but I do not know that that will be necessary."

"Father—"

"I am glad to see you home safely, Zhanil, but perhaps you should go now. There are things I must discuss with your mother."

Zhanil offered Kalmeki an apologetic look as they left together. "I'm very sorry about that. He's being stubborn."

"You should have asked before offering him asylum in our embassy," said Kalmeki.

"You're right, I should have, but when I come home and find out that one of my most trusted guards has been murdered, that my uncle has been assaulted and countless others injured, killed, or threatened, I had to act," explained Zhanil. "I realize it was rude of me not to consult you first and awkward for everyone, but if I know my father, he won't accept the offer unless he absolutely has to, and then he'll probably only send Ellina. He'll take refuge in the sanctuary of Abh. Mother will stay with him, or with her father."

Kalmeki remained silent, mulling over the explanation as they walked. "A good son should protect his parents, but perhaps not in this way."

"What else would you have me do, Kalmeki? The palace is no longer safe, and—"

Shouts filled the corridor, stopping Zhanil in mid-sentence. He froze, tilting his head to try to make out the voices. There were two, both male, one bellowing and enraged, the other less discernable, more even, as though trying to calm the first.

"It is coming from your apartments," said Kalmeki. "I thought your enemies attacked in secret."

The commotion might be unusual, but Zhanil thought he recognized the voices. "I'm not so sure it *is* an attack."

Drawing his sword, he moved quickly down the corridor, pausing just outside the open doorway where he had left a guard on duty not an hour before; he heard the man within, a third voice added to the cacophony. As Kalmeki came up beside him, weapon drawn, Zhanil pushed the door back with the point of his sword and cautiously ventured inside.

The foyer was littered with wreckage: shattered glass, upended furniture and torn hangings. Beyond, in the entry to the sitting room, Amset and the guard tackled another man, who strained to throw them off. Seeing who the assailant was, Zhanil started forward. "Adeja? Amset, what is—?"

"Help me with him!" shouted Amset.

Middle age and a lame leg were no impediment when Adeja was in a rage. He proved more than a match for Amset and Chall, and in the end it took both Zhanil and Kalmeki to help wrestle him to the floor and keep him pinned there. Zhanil had no doubt that he was responsible for the destruction in the foyer, but could not fathom why. Adeja offered no clue to his inexplicable outburst; he was incoherent, frothing with hoarse profanity and threats as tears streamed down his face.

Zhanil fought his rising panic at the sight. Only once had he ever seen Adeja in such a fury, for only one thing could reduce him to such a state. *Has someone harmed Lahis, or Arjuna?* "Bring a cord," gasped Amset, half-sitting on Adeja's right arm. "I need something to tie him down with until he calms down."

"What is going on?" asked Zhanil.

"Perhaps this is the reason." Reaching over with one arm, Kalmeki picked up a wooden box that someone had opened and dropped; grains of what appeared to be salt blanketed the floor. He tilted it for a closer look, then recoiled and pushed it aside. "You should not look at this."

A frightened Alassil rushed in with a sturdy cord. Together, Amset and Kalmeki dragged Adeja to his feet and into a side room where they bound his wrists, securing the other end of the cord to a column. Drained, Adeja made only a token effort to resist, but Zhanil took no chances. He ordered Chall to stand at the door and watch him.

Kalmeki retrieved the box and took it out into the foyer to show Zhanil the contents. The salt had been added as a preservative for two desiccated objects that retained just enough detail to be recognizable as human heads.

Zhanil looked away in revulsion. *Gods, don't let that be Arjuna, or his mother*. "I thought he sent his family away."

"Those are his parents," said Amset. "I managed to get that much out of him while he tore the place apart. They were still living in Tajhaan. The High Prince had them executed, and packed the heads in salt so Adeja would recognize them."

Kalmeki reached into the box to brush aside some of the salt. Zhanil did not see how he could stand to touch the severed heads. "They were very old," he murmured. "It is an evil thing, what this prince has done. A man may take the head of his enemy in battle, but the Storm God curses he who raises his sword to mutilate a woman or an old man or child."

Zhanil helped Alassil right a fallen chair. "Amset, did Adeja say anything else?"

"He wants revenge," replied Amset. "He half-strangled the poor boy who brought in the parcels, and tore apart the room because there wasn't anyone else to attack. It was all Chall and I could do to stop him from doing anymore damage or hurting himself."

Kalmeki carefully placed the box on the sideboard and covered it. "You cannot keep him bound forever," he said.

"Then what do you suggest we do?" asked Zhanil.

What he got was not the answer he wanted, but the kind he had learned to expect from Kalmeki. "In the Turya-lands, we would untie him, give him his bow and his horse, and let him go."

The old response rose to Zhanil's lips: *we're not* in *the fucking Turya-lands*. Words that remained unspoken, because the weight of Kalmeki's verdict spoke of intimate knowledge, ancient grievances settled without hindrance. "Letting him ride south to Tajhaan would be letting him commit suicide," said Zhanil. "He'd never get close enough to the High Prince to strike a blow."

"Then you will have to find another way."

Alassil brought in servants to right furniture and sweep away broken glass. "If you wish," he said, nodding toward the box, "I will have that thing taken away."

"It belongs to Adeja," replied Zhanil. "Once he calms down, he'll probably want to observe whatever rites they practice in Tajhaan."

"As you say, sir, but Silan is fortunate he can still breathe. The bruises are very deep, and he can barely speak. He is so frightened he may not return."

Zhanil nodded. At such a moment of deep personal loss, there was no need to utter aloud what they all knew: Adeja was no longer fit to continue at his post. Some alternate arrangement would have to be made for him. "Make sure Silan receives adequate compensation and a visit from a priest of Abh if he wants it. I will see him later, after I eat and rest."

His instructions to the steward offered one possible solution. "Alassil, while you're doing that, if you'd also send word to my father that his services as a priest are urgently needed."

"Yes, sir, though I am not sure Silan worships Abh."

A passing glance at the window revealed a late afternoon sky turning toward sunset. Zhanil distinctly recalled it being much earlier when he arrived. *Can so much time have passed so quickly?* he wondered. The aching weariness weighing his limbs revealed the truth more surely than any water clock. "I meant for Adeja," he said. "If any priest can comfort him, it must be my father."

* * * *

Zhanil would not show him what was in the box, merely alluding to its contents, which sounded horrible enough without the hard, sympathetic looks Amset and Kalmeki gave him. Still staring at the covered box and the scattered grains of salt, seeing in his mind two mummified heads, hearing the crunch of broken glass as the servants swept the remains of Adeja's outburst, Sephil needed a moment to compose his nerves. He did not need to hear from his son how terrible Adeja's fury could be. He had seen it himself countless times in the past.

A dead assassin in the moonlit courtyard of the sanctuary of Abh in Ottabia. Another assassin lying broken in a pool of blood and gore in a corridor outside the nursery. Poor Silan, who had not even threatened Adeja or those he cared about, was fortunate to be alive. Sephil would visit him later to offer what comfort he could.

First, he needed to see Adeja, though he was not at all certain there was anything he could do.

When he stepped into the small room, the guard insisted the door be left ajar. Sephil surveyed the interior. A lamp burned in one corner, far beyond reach of the man whose bound wrists were secured to a pillar. Adeja, curled bonelessly in a fetal position on the floor, was quietly weeping.

To see his formidable lover reduced to such a state tore at Sephil's heart. "Cut him loose," he ordered.

"I can't do that, sir," said Chall. "It's Prince Zhanil's orders. Do you want me to bring a chair for you to sit?"

Sephil moved past him without answering. The room was bare, but at least Adeja had a carpet on which to lie. He tucked his legs under him and sat on the floor beside Adeja's head, hesitating just a moment before touching him lightly on the cheek; the other man's face was stiff with drying tears. "Adeja, do you want to talk to me?"

Adeja stirred, yet did not open his eyes. "Fuck off."

Having heard it from countless broken souls who came to the sanctuary and from Adeja himself on numerous occasions, Sephil found his profanity neither startling nor offensive. "It is me, Adeja."

"I *know* who it is," growled Adeja. "It's your fault they did this. It's because of you."

You do not know what you are saying. Grief has made you mad. Sephil placed a hand on his shoulder, gently stroking his back. Adeja flinched, trying to shove him off. "I know how much you have sacrificed—"

"You don't fucking know *anything*." Now Adeja opened his eyes, and with his bound hands, shoved Sephil away. "I've given you twenty years of my life, and for *what?* So I can be snubbed by your high-and-mighty family, so I can be cast aside like so much shit when I'm too old and lame to be useful anymore, so I can watch my family bleed and die while you mouth your fucking pieties? My parents were no threat to anybody. They were old and harmless, just a stonemason and his wife scratching out a living in a Tajhaani slum, and now because of you they're now nothing more than two severed heads in a box."

Sephil wanted to touch him, to hold him and tell him that it was only his anguish talking, but in grief there was truth amid the bitterness. "Adeja," he said, his voice nearly breaking, "I never forced you to stay. You could have left whenever you wanted."

Adeja's eyes narrowed, his lips curling back into a snarl. Fresh tears spilled from his eyes. "Do you really think it was that easy? You insisted I was the only one who could guard your precious son. What about *my* son, Sephil? He's never forgiven me for that day in the nursery, for letting him be slighted as some lowborn servant boy trying to rise above his station. Did you *ever* stop to think about anyone but yourself? No, all these years and you haven't changed a bit. You're still the same selfish prince who wanted to suck my cock back in Rhodeen."

It was all Sephil could do not to look away, to stay where he was and not flee in horrified shame. For so many years he had given his life to the service of Abh, trying to open his heart to the god's will and infinite compassion, yet could it be as Adeja said? Was his selfishness simply more refined, attacking the spirit rather than the body?

Finally, he buried his face in his hands to hide his burgeoning tears. "If I wronged you, I—"

"Don't tell me you're sorry," snapped Adeja. "It's too fucking late for that."

* * * *

Zhanil silently dismissed Chall, assuming his place by the door. He did not want to intrude on what was obviously a private meeting, but he wanted to make certain Adeja did not turn violent with his father.

As they waited, Kalmeki had cautioned him against sending for Sephil so early. "A man needs to be alone with his grief," he said. "In the morning, perhaps Adeja will want to talk and take comfort, but now he needs to feel his pain."

As he observed, feeling very much like an interloper, Zhanil realized how much wiser Kalmeki was in these matters. He had only to watch the play of body language between his father and Adeja to know how much of a mistake he had made. Adeja wanted neither company nor comfort, and whatever he said in his anger wounded Sephil more deeply than any of the random insults beggars sometimes hurled at him in the sanctuary. At one point, his father covered his face with his hands and wept.

"I wronged you," he murmured. "I never meant to tie you to me this way. I never meant to be so selfish, so blind. I was young, Adeja, and stupid."

"Yes, you were," said Adeja.

"I kept you because I needed you, because I loved you. You know that."

I shouldn't be listening to this. Rooted to the spot, unable to stop his ears or reconcile the chill of revulsion at what he was hearing, Zhanil's imagination fled down corridors where he knew he did not belong.

Sephil touched Adeja's bound hands, gathering them between his own, bringing them to his lips. Zhanil saw Adeja's fingers move as though accepting the contact. Whatever words passed between them, he did not hear, and did not think it mattered; the truth was told in gestures he would rather not have seen. Shaking, dizzy to the point of nausea, Zhanil stumbled back into the dining room where Kalmeki sat calmly eating. *For all he knows, the food could be poisoned, and still he trusts me*. Closing his eyes to try to stop the spinning, he sank down in a chair and buried his face in his hands.

"What is wrong?" asked Kalmeki.

"I can't tell you." Zhanil took a deep, trembling breath. "I don't even know myself."

The next thing he knew, Kalmeki was beside him, crouching at eye-level. "You do not look well."

"I'm not surprised. This entire day has been a nightmare," said Zhanil. "If I haven't said it before, I apologize for having put you through this."

"Do not apologize," answered Kalmeki. "*Keshkai* share grief as well as joy."

"Somehow I don't think you'd come running to me if something was wrong."

"You do not know that. Right now, you need rest."

Zhanil shook his head. "I need to see my father first. I need to talk to him alone." He placed a hand on Kalmeki's arm, holding onto him for support. "That you're here at all—"

Kalmeki covered the hand with his own larger one. "These things do not need words."

No words. The image of his father sitting on the floor in a lamp lit room with Adeja came into his mind. Zhanil did not know what he would say, or if he had a right to say anything at all.

* * * *

The moment Sephil saw his son slumped in the chair, gripping the armrests with white knuckles, he sensed something was wrong beyond the day's chaotic events. "Adeja will be all right," he said. "He is still bound, but he is much quieter now. I have asked Amset and Chall to let him relieve himself and eat, and Alassil will give him something to help him sleep. Tomorrow I will take him to the sanctuary of Abh. You realize, of course, that he cannot serve in this household any longer—"

"Father, what is between you and him?"

The question, asked in a voice so low it was nearly imperceptible, struck fear into him. While he tended Adeja, Sephil had known the guard was at the door, yet upon emerging he saw that Chall was gone. Could it be that the presence he felt had belonged to his own son, who had chosen that moment to eavesdrop? "Why do you ask me?"

"I heard some of what you said to him, and he to you. I saw how you kissed his hands. You told him you loved him." Zhanil looked up, frowning. "I don't know what else to think."

I cannot lie to him now. If he must hear it, he is old enough to understand. Sephil turned, closed the door behind him and sat down at the table where Kalmeki had recently been; the seat was still warm. "It was not something I ever thought to tell you."

"You and he are-?"

"No, we have not been lovers for a very long time," said Sephil. "It ended before I came here, before I met your mother. But you must understand, the feelings are still there." Zhanil's face tightened, revealing the turmoil within. "Does she know?"

"Yes, she knows. I did not tell you because—" Not knowing how to phrase the information, Sephil hesitated. "I have told you that I was not always a priest. I make no claims to wisdom or chastity, but once, when I was still a prince living in Rhodeen, I did something very foolish, and I paid the price for it."

Zhanil reached for his cup and drank. "I think you'd better tell me now."

Once he set it down, Sephil took the cup and placed it out of reach. "I want you sober, Zhanil. We will only have this discussion once."

"Is it really that terrible?"

Sephil could not decide what answer to give, for he did not know himself. "That depends on how harshly you are prepared to judge me. I was younger than you, Zhanil, and very naïve. My guardian never bothered to instruct me in morals, so when I seduced a soldier at sixteen, I saw nothing wrong with it."

When Zhanil would have interjected with questions, Sephil gestured for him to remain silent. "You will let me finish," he said. "I saw nothing wrong with what I did, but my father did not see it that way. He might have killed me, he was so angry, but instead he imprisoned me for three years in the same apartments you occupied in Rhodeen. It is no wonder you did not like it. What you saw there was my life as it was: three years of excess and debauchery."

Zhanil did not speak. His hand moved, then, perhaps remembering that the wine cup was no longer within reach, he let it fall once again to his lap. "And your father said nothing to you?"

"As long as I did not publicly embarrass him, he did not care what I did in private," replied Sephil. "The moment he confined me, I was no longer his son. Had I been more like my brother or my cousins, it might have been different, but I was never able to please him. I know that I tried very hard."

After more than twenty years, Sephil found the tale no easier to tell than if it had occurred a month ago. Had he only been more cautious, had he not tried so hard to reach a man who seemed to be slipping ever further from all help, he might have kept his secrets and not have to gamble on what his only son would think of him now.

"How does Adeja come into this?" asked Zhanil.

"When I was nineteen, he came into my household as a guard," said Sephil. "Actually, I looked at him as more of a plaything, since I really had no need of a guard. I tried to seduce him from the very beginning, but he would have none of it. He told me exactly what he thought of me, how horrible and pathetic I was, and then the strangest thing happened. I fell in love."

Zhanil's expression was unreadable. "Then the slanders your enemies have printed—"

"Are partially true," admitted Sephil. "I actually did some of those things in my youth." He twisted his fingers in his lap, turning his wrists over to examine the silver cuff bracelets he always wore. If he so chose, he could remove them, show

Zhanil the scars, but it would have been too much. Some things would remain his private burden. "I lie with catamites because I prefer men, and because your mother will not tolerate other women. The arrangement suits us both."

A long silence followed. "I don't know what to think," Zhanil finally said.

Sephil noted his bland tone, his downcast eyes. "That is why I never told you."

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Chapter Eighteen

"Is this what we have come to: poisoning lapdogs and making war on elderly peasants?"

If Dashir expected a reasonable answer, any shred of conscience, his son did not deliver. On the contrary, Ninarsha approved his grandfather's tactics, parroting Armajid's claims that fear would keep Khalgar from taking the field alongside the Turyar. Dashir was shrewd enough to know that a lion like Ampheres, outraged at the threat to his family, would do the exact opposite.

Ninarsha, dressed in Tajhaani armor over a leopard skin kilt, looked out the window across the ramparts of Dhahar. Somewhere on that horizon was southern Rhodeen, and the battle he craved, the decisive blow his grandfather had been promising him for twenty years. "You speak as though you cared, Father. If it wins us a crown, it makes no difference."

Dashir wanted to wipe the smug look off his son's face along with the kohl with which he had smudged his eyes. "Would that be the same difference the High Prince's raids have made? Do you realize how much the people of Rhodeen hate us?"

"We do not need their love, only their obedience," said Ninarsha. "When we drive out the Turyar and I sit on—"

Without thinking, Dashir slapped him hard across the face. "If this campaign succeeds," he said, switching to the language of Rhodeen, "you will be nothing more than a puppet king. And if you cannot understand what I just said, you do not deserve to wear a crown at all." In Tajhaani, he added, "Curb your arrogance, boy. You might have an army down there, but those are your grandfather's soldiers, not yours. You are not king yet, and you have a long road to travel before you ever become one."

Ninarsha, his mouth slack with surprise, touched his hand to his cheek. Dashir did not think he had heard a single word he said. "You *struck* me!"

Had they not been alone, or free from the confines of Tajhaan, Dashir would have exercised more caution. But with Rhodeen only two days distant, he felt his constraints slipping away. "I should have done it sooner, before your head was stuffed full of your grandfather's nonsense. If you think the people of Rhodeen will simply bend their knees to you because you are my son, think again. All they will see is a stripling of a man pretending to be a king, a boy who paints his eyes like a prostitute—"

"When the time comes, at least *I* will not run from the Turyar."

Dashir backhanded him, this time hard enough to make Ninarsha cry out in pain. "You think you are so brave, bullying peasants and bellowing orders at the servants. Stupid boy, you have no idea what you are about to face. You will piss yourself when the Turyar come, see if you do not."

Tears welled up in Ninarsha's eyes. "My grandfather-"

"Yes, run to your precious grandfather and tell him your father disciplined you as he ought. If you cannot take the back of my hand, how do you ever expect to face your enemy without cowering in terror? Your cousin Zhanil Brasides was fifty times the man you are, and the Turyar cut him down like a sheaf of wheat. Your great-uncle Brasidios—I never saw fear in his eyes until the moment the Turyar threw down the gates of Shemin-at-Khul and stormed the city. How do you think *you* will fare when you meet them in battle?"

Ninarsha backed away from him, putting a heavy desk between them. In the corner, Nurad watched quietly, his book lying forgotten in his lap. "We have a great army. Our soldiers have experience against the Turyar. Brasidios never bothered to strengthen his defenses. He never took the threat seriously."

On the dusty plain below Dhahar, an army gathered, soldiers pouring in from every corner of Tajhaan. Once the heavy heat of summer waned, they would strike, hitting Rhodeen just as it brought in the harvest. Dashir preferred not to dwell on the carnage that would follow, or his own inability to command the army not to rape or pillage; the generals his son entertained seemed to regard it as their rightful due.

These are my people, he wanted to tell them. But his voice would have been lost in the multitude, and so he held his tongue.

Ninarsha left the room, presumably to complain about his treatment, or to console himself with one of his whores. *Let him go*, thought Dashir. The time for tantrums and luxuries would end soon enough, and if the experience did not toughen the boy, it would ruin him.

"Father," Nurad began quietly. Dashir turned to him. "Yes, son?" "Did you mean what you said to him?"

"About his being afraid?" Dashir nodded. "Yes, I meant it." Nurad lowered his eyes. "No, I meant about his not deserving to be king."

Dashir stared at him, at the book in his hand. Nurad was always reading, always keeping company with scholars and tutors; the revelation should not have come as a surprise. "Did you understand what I said? It seems your brother did not."

"I understood most of it," admitted Nurad.

Dashir paused, wondering what to make of this new knowledge, then spoke in his native tongue. "If you understand me now, say nothing. I did not know you received lessons in the language of Rhodeen. Some talents should be guarded, kept secret."

From the way his son watched him, Dashir saw he understood. "I did not want to leave you in Tajhaan. Do you know why?"

In the same language, Nurad answered, "You told everyone you wanted me to watch Ninarsha defeat his enemy, so perhaps I would take heart and try harder on the training ground. But I am not so certain now."

"If Ninarsha defeats anyone, it will either be because the Turyar are incredibly lazy or our generals are extremely lucky," said Dashir. "I am not naïve enough to believe either. I do not want you in the capital if your brother is killed."

"Are you afraid that I would be killed, too?"

Dashir crossed the room and sat down beside his son. "There are worse things than being killed. You have been fortunate that your grandfather does not dote on you as he dotes on Ninarsha, but that could change. You know what I mean, yes?" Even here, with the possibility that they were being watched, and that the spy knew the language of Rhodeen, he could not speak as freely as he wanted.

Nurad did not respond, but in his eyes Dashir saw wary comprehension. "Go back to your book," he said, now in Tajhaani. "Perhaps later, when it is cooler, we can go out into the gardens. Your brother will probably spend the rest of the day sulking."

Despite the heat, Dashir went out onto the terrace and looked out over the desert. In a few weeks, if he was fortunate, he could turn his back on Tajhaan forever. Until then, he had to swallow his growing impatience, his restless need to flee and return to the green lands of Rhodeen. *You have waited twenty years and more*, he told himself. *You can endure a few more weeks of this ungodly land*.

And yet, with home so near in both reality and his thoughts, Ninarsha had found a weapon with which to wound him. Yes, he had run from the Turyar, but that was never his intention. From the moment Zhanil Brasides died and he became Crown Prince, Dashir meant to stay at his uncle's side and fight to the end. But when Brasidios, anguished to the point of madness over the loss of his two sons, made his suicidal charge into the Turya lines, Dashir's courage had deserted him.

Somehow, he had found his way to the Tajhaani embassy, where the ambassadors, left to fend for themselves, were trying to escape with their princess. Terreh had stirred his passion from the beginning, and the sight of her standing forlorn and afraid among her women moved him to assist them.

Had he known the price of his aid, he might have left them to their fate and fled alone.

Now Armajid, confident of victory, was attacking the royal family of Khalgar, killing and terrorizing their servants, even striking at his own people to do so. *This is not the relationship I want with my cousins*, thought Dashir. For if by some miracle he could take the throne and hold it, he wanted the bloodshed to end. *Khalgar will think I am responsible for this, that I condoned the attacks, the killings*.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Since his arrival, Dashir had almost nothing to say about those things, good or evil, that were done in his name.

* * * *

"If I judged you, or seemed to judge you, it is only because I didn't know what to think." Zhanil nodded, then gave a short, harsh laugh. "You would think I would have more sense. I'm the last person who has any right to say anything."

Heavy with his thoughts, and despite his exhaustion, Zhanil had spent a restless night. Some of what his father told him, the part about preferring men, came as no surprise, and, indeed, he wondered that he had not guessed it earlier, but the rest bewildered him. That his paternal grandfather cherished a low opinion of priests, he already knew. That Brasidios had held his own son in such poor regard, he could not believe.

Of more immediate concern was the man who lay bound in the little room off the foyer, whose actions meant he must be evicted in the morning. Adeja seemed the very antithesis of Sephil, one fiery and unconstrained, the other calm and softspoken even when angry; it was impossible to imagine them together. Not that Zhanil wanted to, and that decided the matter. As his son, he thought, I've no right to judge him. If he's telling the truth, he hasn't done anything to offend my mother or anyone else.

In the morning, when he interrupted breakfast to see his father, his mother did not leave the table. "I already know, Zhanil," she said. "Whatever you say to him, you will say in my presence." So he apologized before both parents, where he had only anticipated speaking to one.

"I did not expect it would be easy for you to hear," said Sephil.

Ketalya poured a glass of juice and set it before him; she had sent the servants out the moment he arrived. "Drink something, and try to eat, if you can," she said. "This afternoon, I want you to sleep."

Zhanil looked at the juice, taking a sip only when his mother insisted. "Is it that obvious?"

"You have shadows under your eyes."

"I haven't slept well since leaving Mettos," he said. "Father, what you told me about your time in Rhodeen, I can't quite believe that. I know you told me that your father wasn't a particularly warm man, but surely my uncle would have done something to help you."

Seeing his father sigh and glance at the floor, Zhanil regretted the question. The best thing would have been to simply apologize and leave it at that. *We will only have this discussion once*. So Sephil had said last night, and Zhanil sensed that if he did not ask now, he would forever lose the opportunity. "I'm sorry," he said quickly, looking to his mother for approval. "If you don't want to tell me—"

Sephil lifted his hand. "No, you should know these things. The answer is quite simply this: my brother sympathized, even if he did not always understand me. Zhanil looked after me, tried to help me with my lessons, and protected me from my cousins who always teased me. He stopped my father from killing me, yet beyond that there was nothing he could do. My father's rule was absolute, and when he ostracized me from the family, even Zhanil did not dare defy him. But he was the one who arranged for me to escape to the sanctuary of Abh in Ottabia just before the Turya invasion, and it was he who arranged for Adeja to find me there."

"Is that why you named me after him?"

"Your father originally meant to call you Charnil," said Ketalya, "but when he saw you, he changed his mind."

Zhanil accepted the plate of sweet bread and scrambled eggs his mother offered him; he did not have the heart to tell her that he had no stomach for food.

"There is one more thing I wish to tell you before we put an end to this matter," said Sephil. "I know you care deeply for Kalmeki. I know you consider him your other half, but be careful. Your passion can destroy you."

"I know," said Zhanil, "and so does he. In fact, he doesn't let me get away with very much." Aware that his mother was watching him, he tore off a piece of bread and began chewing. "Please reconsider his offer to—"

"Not with your mouth full," interrupted Ketalya.

Frowning, he swallowed. "The Turya embassy is probably the safest place in the city. At least think about sending Ellina there."

"You already know how I feel about putting her in Turya hands," replied Sephil.

"The Turyar aren't going to steal her away to Rhodeen and force her to marry Kargil, if that's what you're worried about," said Zhanil. "If Kalmeki and Nesha give you their word that Ellina will stay here in the city, then she will stay. The Turyar do not lie."

Ketalya reached across the table to grasp his hand. "Zhanil, you know there are other reasons for your father's refusal. If it comes to it, he will do all he can to protect Ellina, but please do not push this on him."

Zhanil choked down another morsel of bread. "Hopefully it won't be necessary. Troops are already coming into the capital from Medás and Sufhír, and horse regiments from Mettos should be arriving within the week. It won't be long before we can meet Tajhaan in the field."

Sephil arched his eyebrow. "We, son?"

"Yes, *we*," replied Zhanil. "You can say what you like, and you can threaten me all you want, but I don't intend to sit at

home like a child while my fellow soldiers fight and die in the field. Grandfather chose a military career for me, and in doing so, he chose to accept the consequences. I accept them, also.

"You talk about being despised, Father. This isn't so very different. If I don't go now, I can never return to the army. Not to Medás, not to Mettos or anywhere else. No one will ever trust me or take me seriously. They'll all talk behind their backs about how I hid behind my grandfather's cloak while my fellow soldiers shed their blood in Rhodeen. Even if it isn't true, they'll say it. I might not necessarily *want* to go, but I *have* to."

"Zhanil," his father said softly, "I would not hold you back, but you do not have a wife or a son to follow you. If something should happen—"

"Then Grandfather should have considered that possibility before enlisting me," answered Zhanil. "If I die, you still have Ellina."

Sephil slowly shook his head. "Rhodeen does not recognize—"

"Rhodeen is a very different place now, Father. Many of the younger generation are now half-Turya, with strong women among them, and if a day comes when they look to a member of the old royal family to lead them, I hardly think they'll care that that prince is descended from my sister." Zhanil reached across the table for his father's hand, which Sephil gave him, clasping his fingers with a grip that did not want to let him go. "You cannot hold me here. You know that, and Grandfather knows it, too."

I know, and gods, how I wish it were not so. "Those are pretty words, Zhanil," said Sephil, "but I am afraid that you will need far more than that in the days ahead."

* * * *

"Alassil tells me that you mean to go with the army to Rhodeen," said Kalmeki.

Zhanil looked sourly toward the door. "Alassil shouldn't be telling others my business."

"It is something I should know, as both an ambassador and your *keshka*." Kalmeki sat down beside him. "Nesha is too old to march with the army, so I will accompany you south."

"Actually, you'll be accompanying Uncle Ettarin," said Zhanil. "I'll be with one of the horse regiments."

Kalmeki's smile lit up his face. "Then this is fitting." Setting his bow on his lap, he smoothed his palm over the curved horn. "It takes three years to make one of these, so a Turya warrior always has one in preparation. This bow I just finished a few days ago. I want you to have it."

When Kalmeki placed the bow in his hands, Zhanil sat frozen in amazement. "I-I couldn't possibly accept this," he stammered. "It's too fine a gift. I can't even shoot it properly."

"Then you will have to learn," replied Kalmeki, still smiling. "I have faith that one day you will come close to hitting your target."

Zhanil's surprise quickly turned to embarrassment. "Kalmeki, I have nothing to give you in return," he said. "I could go out and buy you the finest sword in Bhellin. I will if you ask me to, but you made this with your very own hands. It wouldn't be the same."

Kalmeki shook his head. "Once again, you misunderstand. A Turya does not give a gift with such expectations. I will be content with whatever you give me."

Still holding the bow, Zhanil leaned forward to kiss him lightly on the lips. "That means that I would have to make something for you. Do you think you could use a lopsided candle?"

"Does it burn?"

Zhanil reached up to touch his face before kissing him again. "I don't know. I've never tried it."

* * * *

"Get out of my way. I didn't come here to see you."

Leaning on his cane, fuming and spraying saliva with every word, Lakhun stood his ground in the tenement courtyard. "If you think you can come here and upset my daughter—"

In no mood to argue, Adeja drew his sword and leveled it at the old man's throat, ignoring the gasps and stifled cries of terror that sprang up around him. "Your daughter is *my* wife, and I'm going to see her before I leave, even if I have to gut every fucking carcass in the neighborhood first."

Horrified, the women ducked inside *en masse*, while Lakhun's sons and grandsons remained in the yard, trying to present a menacing front and failing. Only Lakhun did not flinch, slowly pushing the blade away from his neck with one hand. "Why I ever let Lahis marry a soldier, I don't know." "As I recall, you were overjoyed to have a soldier for a son-in-law. Now tell her I'm here before I lose my patience."

Draped in a dark shawl, Lahis appeared, nervously edging past her father and rushing. "What is wrong, husband?" she asked in a small voice. "Please don't be angry." Then she looked at him, taking in his leather-and-mail corselet and other gear. "Where are you going?"

"With the army to Rhodeen," he replied.

That morning, he had left the sanctuary and walked to the nearest army office, where he knew one of the cavalry officers. Pharos owed him a favor, so when Adeja asked to go on the march, he expected no argument. "I have my own horse and gear," he said.

Pharos met his eyes, reading him. "That isn't all you have, Adeja. I've heard things these last few days, and they don't inspire my trust. I know what you want, but I'm not going to sacrifice my entire company helping you get it."

"I'm not asking you to," said Adeja. "All I want is to ride with you. Once we get there, you won't see me again."

Sheathing his sword, Adeja turned his back on Lakhun and led his wife onto the street, away from the prying ears and eyes of her family. "I'm riding with a horse company, so you needn't worry about my leg."

Lahis grasped his arm. "Where are we going?"

"Just walk with me a little. I don't want to do this with your relatives nosing about." Adeja paused at a corner, kicking aside a vagrant to give them some privacy. "I wanted to see you before I left. I've left some papers with Arjuna and some money with the high priest at the sanctuary of Abh. You won't lack for anything, I promise."

Her brow creased, as it did so often these days. "Why are you telling me this?" she asked. "You'll be back soon."

"Lahis, Rhodeen is a long way from here, and if anything should happen to me—"

She covered her face with both hands. Adeja gently pried them away. "You've always been a good wife to me, even if I haven't always been a good husband. Lahis, you have nothing to worry about. Haven't I always taken care of you? Arjuna will be here, and you have your family. You won't be alone." Slowly, he kissed each of her hands, then held them between his own. "I don't want you to cry. You know that I have to go."

"No, you don't," she said, shaking her head. "You aren't even enlisted."

"Lahis," he said softly, persistently, as if to a child, "I have to go. I have to do this. Please don't—"

Wrenching loose, she fled sobbing from him, back toward the tenement and her family. Adeja knew it was not because she did not understand, but rather because she did.

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Chapter Nineteen

Adeja had not asked for a large gathering, only those whom he considered family. Nor had he asked for an elaborate rite, only a small pyre in the sanctuary courtyard. Novices brought kindling and built a hearth pit, and at sunset the high priest Avorim came down with others bearing torches.

Once everyone had gathered, Sephil noticed that Lahis was absent. Arjuna quietly explained that she knew about the deaths, but that his father did not want to upset her further by asking her to attend. Sephil understood, having also left his wife at home. In his case, however, Ketalya had elected to remain behind, stating that she and Adeja were not on good enough terms for her presence to be considered appropriate.

"That does not mean I do not commiserate with him," she said. From her came a lovely alabaster urn, which Sephil placed in Adeja's hands.

Adeja made no comment, but he held the urn throughout, looking at it and touching its smooth surface. Sephil watched him, making a note to tell Ketalya how well her gift was received.

"You will have to forgive us," said Avorim, "but we do not know how these rituals are conducted in Tajhaan."

"There is only the fire, and a few words," replied Adeja, mumbling his words. Since that night a week ago, he had spoken little, numbly accepting his dismissal from the royal household and his confinement in the sanctuary, but under the placid surface Sephil saw his rage simmering and knew it would eventually erupt again.

Zhanil also noticed, for on the third day he drew Sephil aside to tell him what Kalmeki had said to him. "Let him go and look for vengeance, if that's what it takes to make him well again."

Sephil rejected the suggestion as soon as he heard it. "That is not something we condone here."

"Adeja doesn't worship your god, Father."

"It would be suicide."

The discussion ended there, though Sephil knew the matter was not finished. Sooner or later, Adeja would resist the restrictions imposed by the sanctuary, if he had not done so already, and insist on leaving. With his other possessions, he had brought his armor and weapons, which he had been permitted to keep. When asked, Avorim explained that the sanctuary could not confiscate items from supplicants who entered voluntarily. "He has agreed to keep his weapons safely locked away," said the high priest. "Should his condition deteriorate, we will ask his son to remove the items."

By then, it might be too late. He is not altogether in his right mind, thought Sephil. Even now, as he stood over the little pyre, Adeja appeared to have difficulty concentrating. Each day, Sephil prayed and gave what comfort he could, his heart aching at his inability to do more.

"Should we stand anywhere in particular?" asked Amset.

"Stand where you like." Adeja did not insist on formalities. Since the bodies were incomplete, it was not an actual funeral. "If anything was left, my family in Tajhaan would have had the rites already. This is just to send the rest to the hereafter."

When Adeja indicated it was time, Kalmeki stepped forward with the box and opened it. Sephil found it odd to see the Turya among the sparse mourners, as Adeja had made no secret that he disliked the man, but upon closer observation Sephil saw that Kalmeki had come for Zhanil's sake, nothing more.

Momentarily setting aside the urn, Adeja gingerly removed the heads from their salt packing. Someone had thoughtfully wrapped them in linen so Adeja would not have to look at them, yet he held each one, touching it before placing it on the pyre.

What few words he spoke were in Tajhaani, which no one else understood. Sephil wanted to believe that he invoked the protection of some loving god or goddess, but Adeja had never been a religious man and his speech was so vehement, so choked with emotion, that he might either have been asking forgiveness or swearing vengeance.

Once he finished, Adeja took the torch from the priest and lit the pyre himself. Soaked in resin and oils, the kindling flared, the linen-swathed heads going up like dry leaves. Sephil, who had never seen a cremation, found the experience unpleasant, for even fragrant incense and the smallness of the objects on the pyre could not mask the acrid stench that drove him and the other onlookers to the far corners of the courtyard. Khalgari custom required feasting to honor the dead, and Sephil had offered food and drink for the occasion, but Adeja showed no interest in observing this rite. Instead, still cradling the urn, he retreated to the shadows under the colonnade to watch the flames. Avorim politely made his excuses and left with his priests, while no one else seemed to know what to do. Arjuna anxiously watched his father as though unable to decide whether or not to go to him.

"There is a bench," said Sephil. "You do not have to talk to him, but sit near him. Zhanil, if you would go with him. I wish to have a private word with Kalmeki."

Whatever the Turya might have thought of the request, he betrayed no reaction as Sephil drew him aside into the little shrine that opened onto the courtyard. No light penetrated save for the votive candle one of the priests had set upon the god's altar, and the red-gold flames flickering in the doorway.

"I know that you are leaving with the army," said Sephil.

Kalmeki nodded wordlessly. In the eerie fire and shadows eating at the shrine, he seemed taller and more imposing than ever, yet now, when he should have been intimidated, Sephil found he could speak freely. "If I make a request of you, I do not think you will object, or find it surprising."

"You do not need to ask," replied Kalmeki. "We will not be together on the march, but I will watch over your son as I watch over myself. For he is part of me, and there can be no other way."

Sephil had envisioned this meeting in so many different ways, yet always revolving around the same question: *do you*

love my son. Now, when anticipation met reality, he found he had no need to ask.

* * * *

Any other harvest in Rhodeen would have been placid, marked by hard work and celebration, but in the faces of those who crowded the edges of their fields to watch the passing army, Zhanil saw uncertainty, even mistrust. Armies had to eat, and what rations Khalgar had provided in the covered wagons that followed the column were insufficient. Six weeks from Bhellin, crossing stubbled fields and the windswept Ottabian hills, to be followed by another three weeks marching south, and it was obvious additional food and supplies would have to come from somewhere.

Ordinary soldiers did not concern themselves with such things, Zhanil reminded himself. Had Arjuna joined the march that would have been his job: managing resources, purchasing food, beer, and cooking oil from neighboring towns and farms. But as a prince of Rhodeen, Zhanil could not help but feel some affinity with the people who watched their progress with such apprehension.

A day's ride from Meduin, emissaries of the *turkan* appeared, and within hours word spread through the camp that the Tajhaani army had crossed Rhodeen's southern border and was massing on the banks of the Khul near Cassiare. Turyar became regular visitors, cautiously mingling with Khalgari soldiers weaned on stories spun around battles and skirmishes two generations old. Zhanil saw envoys going in and out of his uncle Ettarin's tent, even spying Kalmeki among their ranks, but as a common soldier he was not invited to join them.

Crastin, observing his interest, merely snorted. "If you think they are enjoying themselves with wine and women, think again."

"The Crown Prince doesn't drink, and there aren't any prostitutes in Rhodeen for him to dally with," replied Zhanil. "They're discussing tactics, drawing up plans, but all I hear are rumors."

"Rumors are a soldier's currency in any field camp," said Crastin. "Did you think it would be different for you simply because you are a prince?"

Not knowing what to say, Zhanil treated the question with silence. *Yes, I'm a soldier*, he thought, *but I'm also a prince. This is my land, even though I don't rule here. Can I help it if I feel I should know or contribute more than I do?*

* * * *

Looming over orchards and silk farms in the gathering darkness, the walls of Cassiare stood sentinel two miles distant, its gates barred as citizens anxiously awaited the outcome of a battle that would take place within days.

Across the river, reflected in its waters, hundreds of campfires illuminated the dusk, sparking rumors doubling as estimates. Thirty thousand Tajhaani had come over the desert, a sizeable force comprised of chariots, horse, and infantry.

To the west, hundreds of yurts announced the presence of the Turyar and their *turkan*. They numbered fifteen or sixteen thousand, which seemed a scant number to those accustomed to more organized, professional armies. But Zhanil knew from Kalmeki that Arzhati and his brother had taken Rhodeen with a comparable force. The numbers were nothing to sneer at.

"Together we make about thirty-six thousand. Do you think it'll be enough?" asked Eddar, speaking softly so as not to attract Crastin's notice.

"I think we might be about even in terms of numbers," replied Zhanil, "but it'll probably come down to tactics and sheer good luck. Tajhaan isn't fighting in the desert, which is where they train. It could be a serious disadvantage."

As usual, Agan felt compelled to weigh in with his opinion. "With this flat terrain and those chariots, I don't think so. They'll run our infantry down."

Chariots were not part of the Khalgari arsenal, so Zhanil did not know how to reply. He knew charioteers employed archers, but suspected the Turyar, with their mobility and swift tactics, knew how to deal with the threat. And if the Khalgari dealt with Tajhaani chariots the way they had been trained to cope with the Turyar, with their javelins, the enemy advantage might be minimized altogether.

"At least this time we don't have to fight the Turyar," said Eddar. "I saw them before, and I wouldn't want to meet any of them in battle."

Agan snorted. "They don't look so tough."

Crastin appeared at the edge of their campfire. "Off to bed with you, boys," he barked. "The enemy is not going to wait for you to get your lazy asses out of your bedrolls tomorrow morning."

* * * *

Zhanil's stomach rumbled in protest as he fastened the last buckles on his corselet and began inspecting his javelins. Breakfast that morning had consisted of half-rations, which caused most of the men to grumble.

"There's no sense in wasting victuals if you're just going to throw it up again," retorted the cook.

"But how are we supposed to fight with empty bellies?" complained Eddar.

"If you don't want your biscuits and ale," said Agan, "I'll take them."

Zhanil ate in silence, chewing the bland biscuits slowly to make them last longer. From Adeja and half a dozen other hardened soldiers, he learned that soldiers fought on adrenaline, not food. A full stomach would just burden him when his turn came to fight. "What you don't throw up will just sit there," said Adeja.

"You're assuming that I have a weak stomach."

Adeja did not share in the jest. "When you see what a battle is really like, you'll be fortunate if throwing up is *all* you do."

He should have come with us, thought Zhanil, reaching down to pat his horse's neck. The last he had seen of his mentor was in the sanctuary on the night of the funeral. Adeja had barely spoken to him, instead remaining unreachable, fixated on something Zhanil could neither see nor comprehend.

Let him go, Kalmeki had said. Give him his horse, his sword, and let him go. Simplistic as it sounded, and suicidal as it probably would have been, the Turya way might have cleansed Adeja of some of the demons that hounded him.

When ordered, Zhanil guided his horse into position, in the second row of his company's formation. In front of the cavalry were the infantry phalanxes, a thicket of spears ten deep, while archers gathered on the left and right flanks. Behind them were infantry reserves.

Zhanil did not know in what order the men would move, but from snatches of conversation, some of it rife with conflicting information, he concluded that Ettarin and Arzhati would wait for the enemy to ford the river and make the first move. When that would occur, however, was anyone's guess.

"We could be sitting here for hours," said Sheptu, a middle-aged soldier at his left. A foreigner, his name and dark skin proclaimed a Juvan heritage. Unlike Adeja, he had enlisted in his youth, transferring from the infantry to cavalry. "Sometimes an army can sit and wait for a day or more. Let's just hope it doesn't get too warm out here."

So far, the weather had been mild, but in full armor a man could get hot very quickly. "Do you think they'll really take those chariots across the river?" asked Zhanil.

"Tajhaan chose a good position," replied Sheptu, "but crossing makes you vulnerable, so naturally they'll prefer to stay on their side. We'll see how impatient they are."

An hour later, they were still waiting. Crastin's lieutenant, an arrogant young man named Rinald, rode up and down the ranks making certain no one dozed off in the saddle; some, including Zhanil, had not slept well the night before.

"Look lively," he barked, swatting several men on the knees or arms with his riding crop, "or the Tajhaani will hand your asses to you before you even know what hit you."

A trumpet sounded from the rear. Sheptu gestured toward the river, now surging with men fording the waters. Zhanil awaited the lethal volley of arrows, but Sheptu was shaking his head. "Not yet," he said. "We'll let some of them get across, then give them a good pounding. Attack too soon and they'll retreat, and then we'll have to wait all over again."

As the first ranks of Tajhaani infantry swarmed up the near bank, the air came alive with the loud rush of arrows. Shields came up, missiles thudding into them, and men dropped where they could not find cover. Behind them, more men crossed the river, and still the Khalgari phalanxes waited. Not even the Turyar moved. It was, Zhanil mused, almost as though the Tajhaani infantry was not worth the effort.

A second trumpet blared, and as the volley ceased, the foremost Khalgari phalanxes locked shields, lowered their spears into position, and surged forward. In ragged lines, the Tajhaani raced toward their enemy, trying to build momentum.

Zhanil heard the impact as the two lines met, clashing together in a din of shields, shouts, and the clang of metal. Shrieks of dying and wounded men reached his ears, and he sensed the apprehension of the green soldiers around him. What they thought and felt, so did he. It seemed too early, too fine a day for men to die.

In the Tajhaani rear, horsemen emerged from the river and began to turn and pour along the ranks, trampling men. Archers fired into the melee. Zhanil, reaching down to calm his restless mount, shook his head at the carnage. Surely there was no way the Tajhaani cavalry could avoid running down their own fellow soldiers. It was no wonder his grandfather had transferred him to the cavalry, for in this first battle Zhanil saw what others had been telling him for a long time: infantry were disposable.

On the left and right flanks, the Khalgari archers withdrew to make room for infantry reserves, men with long pikes who went directly for the horses.

Zhanil saw several horses topple, but as they went down he lost sight of their riders. No doubt the other infantry moved in to finish them.

The skirmish ended within the hour, with the Tajhaani retreating across the river. Beyond the chaotic sprawl of dead and wounded, Zhanil saw the main body of the Tajhaani army, its front lines now in disarray as the survivors attempted to restore order. They would regroup, tend their wounds, and either later in the day or tomorrow there would be another clash.

He did not expect the Turyar to move when they did. In loose formation, they crossed the river, harrying the stragglers with arrows. Men dropped as they ran.

"In an hour or two, once the wounded are off the field, then we'll probably go," said Sheptu. "Hit them before they can recover."

A cavalry charge meant trampling the men lying on the field. Those who could walk were already staggering back, while army medics raced out to try to save the rest. Soldiers moved out to protect them, some helping to carry the wounded on stretchers while others dispatched the enemy wounded and those Khalgari who were beyond help.

Crastin rode up and down the line, Rinald looking selfimportant by his side. "Get ready, boys," he said. "We have our orders. We go in front with the Turyar for the charge, followed by our infantry. Make sure you stay together. The last thing you want to do is get lost in enemy lines."

In orderly lines, the company advanced to the front ranks and took position ahead of the supporting phalanx. Zhanil drew his sword and waited, as they all did, for the signal to charge.

When it came, he reacted, racing forward over the field of carnage he had been so loathe to trample, slowing briefly as he hit the river and its gently pulling current. Then he was climbing the sloping embankment where the ground had already been torn to pieces by hundreds of men and horses.

He looked past the man in front of him, at the Tajhaani lines growing ever closer, imminent contact tearing from his throat the formless war cry universal to all soldiers. A javelin whizzed past his head, striking home behind him. *Keep your head low, your sword at the ready*, Crastin had said. Someone had not been listening.

* * * *

"No, boy, you are *not* going to send all your men in at once," said Dashir, leaning over the side of his chariot to snap at Ninarsha. "This is not a game of *peji*, and you gain nothing by throwing everything at the enemy. Let the generals run this battle, if you will not listen to me."

If he had not done so before, Ninarsha certainly would not heed him now. Dashir marked the manner in which his son glared at him, scowling at the harsh words and hand on his chariot.

"You will not address me as 'boy' in front of my men," hissed Ninarsha.

"They are *not* your men," said Dashir, "and your insistence on acting the fool does not earn you anyone's respect. You would do well to remember that you are only a figurehead, here to inspire the soldiers and look pretty in your gilded chariot. Leave the business of fighting to those who know how."

Sooner or later, his son would probably insist on joining the battle. Youthful pride had no place for common sense, which Ninarsha would have learned quickly enough under his father's discipline. *He will ride out and get himself killed*, thought Dashir.

Whether or not the Tajhaani generals would follow him when Ninarsha fell, Dashir did not know. Since they appeared to be acting solely on the authority of the High Prince, Dashir could not count on their support.

"This battle might last the entire day," he said, "or spill over into tomorrow. It will not end quickly. You are going to have to be patient."

On his right, looking small and out-of-place in his armor, Nurad clutched the railing to steady himself; his white knuckles and tightly pursed lips were the only evidence of his terror. Dashir placed a hand on his arm. "Do you want to return to camp?" he whispered.

Nurad vehemently shook his head. "If I do, everyone will know you were lying to Grandfather when you said you meant to put some courage into me, and if he thinks I am useless, then...."

He did not have to say it.

* * * *

A javelin sliced the neck of Crastin's horse, dropping the stallion abruptly to the ground. Inertia propelled his rider forward, vaulting over his head to land hard on his back. Crastin raised an arm, as though to ward off the hooves that trampled him a half-second later.

Zhanil quickly glanced away. His arm ached, his hand slippery with blood not his own. Adeja had once complained that all a cavalryman knew how to do was slash. If that was true, then Zhanil had done his share of it, hacking at exposed throats and limbs as he pushed through the Tajhaani front ranks, more often than not leaving men to die. Chaos left no room to finish the job properly.

Others saw Crastin fall. Rinald charged forward, taking command with an almost indecent glee that ended in the halfdozen spears that pierced him and dragged him off his horse.

A distant trumpet signaled the order to retreat. Looking around, Zhanil saw how few seemed to have heard. Shouting, he surged forward, pulling at reins and gesturing, ordering his companions back before cutting his way free and making for the river and the safety of the Khalgari lines.

Mid-afternoon had come, the hours passing without notice. Zhanil did not know who decided that the fighting would stop for the day, or how the opposing sides reached a consensus. As he gauged the mood in camp, it seemed the type of decision that was instinctive. Most soldiers just *knew* when the battle was done.

Zhanil dismounted and checked his horse for injuries, finding only a few shallow cuts. Disoriented from the noise and blood, he ached all over, but was otherwise unhurt. As the other men rode in, he counted them. *Seven, eight, nine* after twelve, they stopped arriving.

Like them, he searched faces with disbelieving eyes, realizing there would be no more. So many gone. Those who had not seen Crastin or Rinald fall took it the hardest, as comprehension gave way to confusion.

"Who's going to lead us?" asked Eddar. His voice sounded small, almost childlike, in the din of the camp, and his face was green with shock.

"I will," answered Zhanil.

Why he spoke at all, he did not know. Aside from his princely rank, which counted for nothing in the military, he had no business assuming command. Even then, he knew it, and regretted that no one had the nerve to challenge him. Sheptu could easily have wrested leadership from him, and probably should have.

Instead, everyone stared blankly at him, waiting for instructions. "Go see to your horses, then each other." Zhanil took a deep breath to suppress the quaver in his voice. "We'll see about getting some fresh water and some proper food."

The men numbly went about their chores, bringing in water and kindling. Agan came back from the infirmary tent, looking nauseous but bearing news. "I found two more of our men over there. Danel doesn't look so good, but Thorm might actually make it."

Dusk brought a messenger carrying a summons to the royal tent. With assurances to the men that he would return, Zhanil left Sheptu in charge and went with the man.

Ettarin greeted him over a wide folding table covered in maps, papers, and writing implements. In a chair by the brazier sat the *turkan*. Kargil occupied a folding camp stool, a parchment spread across his knees. No one else was present.

"We heard about your losses today," said Ettarin, offering a familial hug as well as a cup of wine, the first such luxury Zhanil had enjoyed in nearly two months. "Please, sit down. I have just dismissed my generals, and Arzhati has sent his advisors back to the Turya camp."

Zhanil nodded to the two men. "I probably shouldn't stay too long," he told his uncle. "The men in my company are understandably anxious about their situation."

Ettarin nodded. "That is why I wanted to see you. Your actions today were more than proper. You led your fellow soldiers safely back and saw to it they were provided for, but you must realize that you cannot continue to lead them," he said. "There are simply too few of you left to form an adequate company, so tomorrow you and the others will be absorbed under my command."

Having expected this, Zhanil made no protest. He sipped at his wine, savoring it, while perusing the lists and charts on the table before him.

"Tomorrow we will move on their center," said Arzhati. "If the prince wishes to join us, he is more than welcome."

Zhanil looked up from an invoice written in his uncle's precise hand. "I'm afraid I don't understand."

"While your army engages the enemy from the front and side," explained Kargil, "our best riders will cut around and strike hard for the center to eliminate their prince."

Ettarin demurred at the invitation. "It is a considerate offer, but dangerous."

"No more dangerous than what I faced today," said Zhanil. "Not to be disrespectful, but if your company doesn't fight tomorrow, I'll be sitting on the sidelines with them. I understand your desire to keep me safe, but—"

"You have done your share, Zhanil," answered Ettarin, more firmly than necessary. "No one will be able to fault your courage on the battlefield."

This isn't why I came. With a heavy sigh, Zhanil turned to Arzhati. "I would be more than happy to join you."

His uncle's palpable displeasure filled the tent. When the mood struck, as it rarely did, Ettarin had no difficulty reminding others whose son he was. "This is not a game, and no time for you to play the noble prince. We can order you to remain behind."

Now, with the Turyar looking on, was not the time to waver. "I know that better than anyone," replied Zhanil. "What do you think I just came from out there?"

"Why such argument?" asked Arzhati. "Turyar do not debate these things. A *turkan's* son must ride as any other warrior, if he is able. If it is a question of the young man not having sons to follow him should he fall in battle, Kargil rides with us tomorrow as well, and the risk to him is just as great."

Had it been anyone else, Ettarin might have reprimanded him for the interruption. "You take chances."

Arzhati laughed. "Of course," he said. "Without chance, what does a man gain? My brother knew this when he rode with me to take Khul, and he would not have cursed his death as others might. A Turya who wishes to die in his bed stays home, but he achieves nothing. So let the boy ride and accept what the gods give him for taking the risk."

Zhanil did not know whether to be grateful or apprehensive for his support. "We will have the element of speed and surprise."

"Indeed," answered Arzhati, nodding. "Our people have used this advantage since the Storm God first gave us horses. Now, then, where is your *keshka*?"

"I assumed Kalmeki was here, acting as an ambassador."

Arzhati knit his brows together in a heavy frown. "He did not ride with you this afternoon?"

"Kalmeki doesn't belong to my company," explained Zhanil, "so no, he wasn't with me." "*Keshkai* must ride together. Kalmeki knows this, but if he has forgotten his duty, I will remind him. Tomorrow, you will both come with us."

Ettarin poured himself a cup of wine. "I have not given my consent."

"But you will," said Arzhati. "If your king puts his grandson among warriors, then obviously it is to make a warrior out of him. There can be no other reason."

"Father," said Kargil, "these people do not do things as we do."

Zhanil had not intended to address his cousin, but Kargil's condescending tone begged a reply. "As I recall, Kargil, you're only *half*-Turya."

Not surprisingly, Kargil did not like being reminded of this fact. "I am Turya," he said coldly. "My blood and spirit belong to the sea of grass, and to the Storm God. I am Turya. I need no more than this."

"Does your mother know how you feel about her people?"

"That is enough," Ettarin said sharply. "Zhanil, we are here as allies. There is no place for this youthful foolishness."

Zhanil glared once more at Kargil before addressing his uncle. "And as an ally and potential brother-in-law, I want to know precisely where my cousin stands on the issue. I have a right to know. My sister has a right to know."

"This is premature and ill-advised—"

"Then when do you suggest we discuss this, Uncle?

Arzhati loudly cleared his throat, but his eyes were on his son. "Perhaps it is not unwise to speak of these things, if we are to be allies and kinsmen," he said. "Kargil, if you speak ill of Rhodeen, you speak ill of your mother also. Is this what you intend?"

Kargil's eyes narrowed. "She accepts the Turya way."

"That is not what I asked, and you know better than to say this," replied Arzhati. "You know better than to make enemies of her people, who are also your people. We will speak of this again later, when the battle is finished."

"There is nothing to discuss," said Kargil. "We are Turyar, and we rule this land. It is nothing without us."

Rhodeen was a kingdom a thousand years ago, thought Zhanil, when you were still wearing animal skins and before you ever knew what civilization was. "And on this side of the mountains," he replied, "you are nothing without Rhodeen."

Ettarin opened his mouth to issue a reprimand. Arzhati lifted his hand for silence, yet his eyes remained fixed on Zhanil. "It is a cruel statement," he said softly, "but it may be so."

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Chapter Twenty

Adeja kept his word to Pharos. Once he saw his chance, he left the company and joined the ranks of Turyar and Khalgari preparing for a center strike on the Tajhaani. Although not a cavalryman, Adeja understood the tactic well enough to believe it had a chance of success. No other maneuver would get him so close to his objective, and that was all that mattered.

Armajid, decrepit old spider that he was, had not come to lead his armies in person, but sent his son-in-law and grandson as figureheads to rally support for the conquest of Rhodeen. Adeja would have preferred the High Prince, the man to whom, long ago, he had once sworn his undying loyalty, the man who had killed his parents like so much cattle. In his absence, Adeja would settle for one or both of the others.

No one questioned his intent, or even his right to be there, not on the long march from Khalgar, and certainly not now. When a soldier got a certain look in his eyes, you stayed away. Adeja saw it mirrored in the faces around him, that fear that, whatever his demons, he might just destroy them all in trying to purge them. As a result, he found no companions on this march, and did not want them.

He took pains not to let Zhanil see him around the encampment, but could not resist the occasional temptation to watch his former charge. Scratched and bruised from an earlier skirmish, Zhanil looked otherwise unhurt. Word throughout the camp said he had acquitted himself well yesterday, taking command when his superiors fell, getting the survivors safely back across the river when the call came to retreat. Hearing such praise gave Adeja as much pride as it would have had Arjuna's name been on men's lips.

Beside Zhanil, a golden shadow on horseback, Kalmeki stayed close. Had he to choose, Adeja would have preferred a different companion for Zhanil, but in some things fate had not followed his wishes. His one consolation was that Kalmeki would guard the prince better than Adeja ever could, as he had once guarded Sephil.

Zhanil has come so far, he thought, and he doesn't need me now. A moment's regret was all Adeja permitted himself. Zhanil could watch his own back, and that left Adeja free to pursue his own agenda.

He found it strange how necessity made some things bearable. Adeja swallowed his old animosity as he approached the Turyar, inconspicuously taking his place among the other Khalgari in their ranks. The Turyar could ride, and they could shoot, and in that dwindling space where his emotions dwelt, he could admit admiration for their fearlessness.

Arzhati led them far to the right, feigning retreat, and then back around, over uneven ground where no chariots could engage them. Momentum propelled them into the enemy's left flank, though ranks of startled infantry ill-equipped and unprepared to stand their ground. Most scattered, stirring chaos as they fled toward the center. Those they left behind dropped quickly under Turya arrows and Khalgari swords.

Adeja did not register the noise or confusion, so intent was he on searching for the opening, the opportunity he needed. As the lines wavered and broke, it became difficult to remember where he was, but then he saw them: two gilded chariots surrounded by bodyguards. In one, gripping the rim in growing frustration, stood a proud young man wearing an elaborate corselet, a leopard skin draped over one shoulder.

The half-Tajhaani prince, Ninarsha. Adeja sheathed his sword and drew a javelin from the quiver slung across his horse's flanks. The prince's bodyguard meant nothing to him, for he needed only get close enough for his throw to strike true. Whatever happened after that, whether he escaped to try again with the prince's father, or the guards cut him down, made little difference.

As he surged forward, Ninarsha turned his head and saw him. His eyes, narrowed in contempt at the disorder around him, widened in surprise. Adeja blurred his reaction, focusing on the prince's exposed throat—only that—so when a long, guttural cry, mingling rage and triumph, reached his ears, he never recognized it as his own.

* * * *

Dashir turned in time to see the javelin slice the air. Instinctively, he ducked to the side, pulling Nurad down with him, but the missile never reached him, was never even intended for him. A few feet away, he saw Ninarsha stumble back and sag against the railing, twitching around the shaft that protruded from his throat. Rivulets of blood flowed from the wound, seeping warmly into gilt-and-leather corselet that had not protected him.

And then, past the crumbling wall of bodyguards, Dashir saw the man who had thrown the javelin, his lips curled back in a feral snarl. Another javelin appeared in his hand, and in his gaze, flat and hard with a cold madness, Dashir read the message: *this one is for you*.

"Get down!" he screamed at Nurad, just rising from the floor of the chariot. The javelin whizzed past them, thudding into the earth behind the chariot.

The guards fell away, fleeing in terror from the Turya arrows riddling their companions. A third javelin appeared, the man who held it—dark enough to be Tajhaani, yet wearing Khalgari armor—driving his mount forward for another attempt.

Drawing his sword, Dashir surged up, grasped the javelin's shaft in his left hand, and pulled both it and the man forward. Their eyes met, as Dashir slashed with the sword in his right hand. Warm blood sprayed over him, onto the chariot as the man slumped forward and toppled from the saddle to the ground.

Dashir seized Nurad, clutching him tightly as the Turyar began to surround the chariot. Their driver was gone, lying dead twenty feet behind them as he had tried to flee. There was nowhere to go, no escape, but if the Turyar thought they were going to cut his only remaining son to pieces while he watched, Dashir meant to prove them wrong.

Nurad trembled against him, visibly struggling to contain his fear; he neither whimpered nor spoke. *Gods*, thought

Dashir, he is so young, so deserving of life. I should never have brought him here.

"Father, is this the end?" Nurad at last found his voice.

All Dashir could do was press his lips to the boy's forehead. "Yes," he croaked. "This is the end."

* * * *

In battle, soldiers seemed to spend their time alternating between numbness and adrenaline-fueled madness. When the time came to make the charge, Zhanil put his trust in Arzhati's skill and followed, wondering how, in all the chaos, he or anyone else could stay focused enough to exercise judgment.

War had nothing to do with rational thought.

Zhanil recalled very little of the charge or the battle that followed. Out of the blur of faces, voices, and flashing weapons, he saw a pair of elaborate chariots, their horses cut free of their harnesses. Dead bodyguards scattered the ground, and on the floor of one chariot slumped a young man with a javelin through his throat. In the second chariot huddled a man shielding a frightened teenager with one arm, brandishing a bloodstained sword with the other.

Bows drawn, the Turyar surrounded them and took aim. "Stop!" shouted Zhanil.

"They are enemies," said Kalmeki.

"You are not going to shoot the boy."

Zhanil looked around, but neither Arzhati nor Kargil were anywhere to be found. Then he glanced down at the man in the chariot. Despite his Tajhaani dress, the man had the lighter features of Rhodeen. *I know who you are*, he thought. "Prince Dashir, put down your sword," he said, "or they will kill you both."

Still clutching the sword, Dashir lifted his gaze, his eyes narrowing. "My son is blameless," he answered.

"The Turyar will not kill you if you surrender. Put down your sword and stand up."

"You cannot interfere—" began Kalmeki. His uneasiness was palpable, and Zhanil sensed reticence from several other Turyar as well.

"I am claiming them as my prisoners," he replied, loudly enough for all to hear. To the man in the chariot, he said, "Prince Dashir, I think you know who I am. I am Prince Zhanil Sephides. If you want your son to live, you will put down your sword and come quietly."

Slowly, keeping hard eyes fixed on Zhanil, Dashir tossed his sword to the ground and stood, drawing his son with him. Right away, he was accosted by five Khalgari who bound his hands behind his back. He submitted, protesting only when they handled his son too roughly.

"Do not harm them," said Zhanil. "Take them to the Crown Prince of Khalgar and tell him that they are prisoners. Lord Kalmeki, if you would ride back with them and explain the situation to my uncle, I will see about finding the *turkan* and Lord Kargil."

From the center, it was difficult to gauge the progress of the battle, but the fighting seemed to have abated. Nonetheless, wherever Zhanil looked, he saw disarray. "The enemy's ranks are broken," said one of the Turyar. "We will harry their retreat, and leave a path of corpses from here all the way to the Tajhaani border."

Back in the Khalgari camp, Zhanil learned why he had not been able to find the *turkan*: Arzhati was dead, felled by a javelin as the Turyar charged into the Tajhaani left flank. At first, Zhanil did not think he had heard correctly, and yet there was the body, covered by its own bloodstained cloak.

Zhanil watched from a respectful distance as a Turya honor guard took charge of the body and bore it on their shields back to camp, placing it on the ground before the *turkan's* tent. "Are they just going to leave him there?" he asked.

"They will set up a bier," replied Kalmeki, rejoining him. "He will lie in state while men prepare his grave and the goods he will take with him to the next world. It will take three, perhaps four days."

"Have you found Kargil?"

Kalmeki shook his head. "He lies injured in another tent. I have not seen him, but I have heard the injury is serious. If he lives, he may not be able to lead. As for your prisoners, they are safely in custody."

"You did not want me to spare them, did you?"

"You are soft," said Kalmeki. "I can understand why you would not want to kill the boy, but had it been the father alone and my choice, I would have killed him. It is dangerous to let him live."

Zhanil nodded. "They may be my prisoners, but that decision isn't mine to make. Dashir may yet be executed."

Ninarsha's corpse had been removed from his chariot and taken back to the Khalgari camp as proof of his death. His fate, and the capture of his father and brother, broke whatever resolve the Tajhaani might have had. Soldiers laid down their weapons, and generals sent envoys to Ettarin asking for terms of surrender, chiefly the right to collect their dead and retreat across the border.

When Zhanil and Kalmeki returned to the royal tent, Ettarin received them with little enthusiasm. His face bore lines of care and exhaustion, and he nursed a cup of wine to ease fractured nerves. "The situation is grim among the Turyar," he said. "Their messengers have informed me that Lord Kargil has lost four fingers of his left hand. The healers have stopped the bleeding and he may live, but until he can assume command we must deal with Arzhati's advisors."

"Forgive me," replied Kalmeki, "but a *turkan* must be of whole body. If what you say is true, then the Turya elders will not recognize Kargil as Arzhati's successor."

Zhanil gaped at him. "You can't be serious. It's only a few fingers, not his entire arm."

"Please explain," added Ettarin. "This does not sound like a debilitating injury. There should be no reason why he cannot take the throne."

"That is because you are men of the east, not Turyar," answered Kalmeki. "A *turkan* must be able to fight, to lead his people in war, and if Kargil cannot hold a bow, then he cannot become *turkan*."

As Zhanil searched his thoughts, wondering at this sudden change in fortune, Ettarin asked, "Who will rule in his place?"

"The elders must take the wishes of the Rhodeen lords into consideration, of course," explained Kalmeki, "but ultimately our laws will prevail. The new *turkan* must be Arzhati's kin. If Kargil had a brother, or if Lazphi had lived or fathered sons, choosing a successor would have been a simple matter. For now, Lady Thano will rule in Khul."

"Will there be conflict?"

"Once the elders decide, the matter is settled. There may be argument among the elders or the *turkan's* kinsmen, but any man who spills blood or attempts to bribe the elders dishonors the Storm God."

"But will the Rhodeen lords follow those rules?" asked Zhanil.

Kalmeki clenched his jaw. "If they do not, they will be punished. Arzhati allowed them to keep their titles as long as they obeyed Turya laws. He may be dead, but the elders are bound to follow his policies until a new *turkan* is chosen. Whoever he is, the lords may renegotiate with him. There will be no fighting. The only warriors Rhodeen has now are Turya, and they will follow custom."

Ettarin appeared satisfied with this answer, though Zhanil could sense the matter would preoccupy him until they left Rhodeen. "We will keep Dashir Serrides and his son in our custody for now. I do not know what Turya law says regarding prisoners of war, but since Dashir surrendered to you, Zhanil, he and Nurad are your captives according to our rules of engagement. Lord Kalmeki, I trust you will explain this to the Turya elders should they inquire?" As sunset fell over the camp, Zhanil stripped off his armor, washed, and ate a solitary supper in his uncle's tent. Ettarin, who professed no appetite, had gone out with his generals to visit the infirmary and make arrangements for the dead. From Agan, Zhanil already knew that the camp hospital was a grim place, with insufficient cots and help. Some men lay clutching their wounds for hours, while others expired from their wounds before a healer could reach them.

I should have gone with him, thought Zhanil, staring at the tent flap through which Ettarin had left. Glancing down at his plate, he saw that he had just been pushing his food around with the fork, not really eating.

Upon further reflection, the prospect of visiting the infirmary nauseated him, but he resolved to look in on his prisoners before he retired, just to make certain they received humane treatment.

The canvas flap parted, and Kalmeki entered the tent. "I have information for you," he said.

"Is it about Kargil?"

"No, I have learned who killed Ninarsha. I thought I should tell you myself."

Zhanil set down his fork at the heaviness in Kalmeki's voice. He knew his lover was as exhausted as he was, and probably had not eaten anything since that morning, but the gravity he sensed set him on edge. "Kalmeki, what is wrong?"

Even then, he did not receive a direct answer. "I questioned several witnesses before I came to you, to make certain. It was your Adeja who threw the javelin."

"That's impossible. We left him behind in Bhellin."

Kalmeki now stood beside his chair, grasping the back rest. "Zhanil," he said gently, "his body is outside. Your uncle's men recovered it from the battlefield."

Body meant *dead*. Shock settled in the pit of Zhanil's stomach. Pushing back his chair, he stood up. "Show me."

Ettarin's royal guards had their campfire outside. A covered stretcher lay on the ground within the ragged circle of firelight. Zhanil knelt in the dirt beside the body, the guards stepping back to give him room, and drew back the cloth.

Adeja's eyes were closed, his face cut, bruised, and begrimed from where he had fallen. Death could draw horrific expressions on corpses, but Adeja's lips curved ever so slightly in a smile as eerie as it was enigmatic. *He wanted this*. Zhanil swiftly averted his eyes, searching for the fatal wound, finding it in a blood soaked strip of cloth with which someone had bound Adeja's throat.

With trembling hands, he drew the cloth back into place. What am I going to tell his wife and Arjuna? Gods, what am I going to tell Father?

"The mortuary unit is working as fast as it can to process the bodies," said the guard captain. "But this one has no regimental marks. We need a name so we can send him back to his family."

Processing meant a mass grave for common soldiers, defleshing and boiling the bones for noblemen whose families could afford the service. Zhanil did not want to hear the details, and could not bring himself to allow the army morticians to touch Adeja with their knives. "His name was Adeja ked Shamuz. He was born in Tajhaan, and they cremate their dead."

"Do you want a pyre, sir?"

"Yes," replied Zhanil, "and the ashes when it is done." Giving those instructions was all he could manage. On shaky legs, he made his way back inside and sat down, putting his head in his hands. Emotions flooded him, tightening his chest, but he found he could not weep.

He felt Kalmeki's hand on his shoulder. "Do not mourn. It was a good death, and one, I think, that he wanted. Men will remember his name now."

"What good are such things to me, or to his wife or son?" asked Zhanil. *What good is his death to my father, who loved him?* "He came because he wanted vengeance, and because he thought he had nothing else. Are men going to remember him for that?"

Now Kalmeki sat down beside him, drawing him into an embrace. "When you stop grieving, you will realize this is a better end for him than the one he would have had had he lived. He was too restless a spirit to have died content in his bed."

Zhanil nursed his grief with Kalmeki's words and a cup of wine, and was composed by the time Ettarin returned.

"I have spoken to one of the Turya elders," said Ettarin. "Kargil will survive his injury, but he will not become the next *turkan*."

"We already knew that," mumbled Zhanil. "It has nothing to do with us."

He sensed his uncle's gaze on him, appraising his morose posture. "You have had a long, tiring day, Zhanil, and I have heard that you know about Adeja ked Shamuz. I do not expect that you are in a particularly good mood right now, but you will have to put your personal concerns aside. What happens in Rhodeen *is* our concern, and for good reason. I think you know this."

At the moment, Zhanil could not bring himself to care. "As long as the new *turkan* is friendly to Khalgar, it makes no difference."

"Once again," said Ettarin, "you are wrong. Turya law says only that Arzhati's successor must be a kinsman. He does not necessarily have to be a blood relation. Therefore—"

A hand dropped on Zhanil's shoulder, as ominous as Kalmeki's touch had been comforting. "Therefore," continued Ettarin, "as a scion of the old dynasty, you are going to claim the throne of Rhodeen. You are going to become king."

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Part Four

A Crown of Stars

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Chapter Twenty-One

Sephil's spirits mirrored the gray weather outside, and like the wind that rattled the panes of his sitting room window, his hands trembled as he held the letter and reread it. The words themselves should have come as no surprise, for the moment he went to the sanctuary and found Adeja gone, from the time he interviewed a distraught Lahis, he had known that his beloved would not return.

Foreknowledge made the reality no easier to bear.

Words were hazy things, inviting the imagination to believe they might be false. The polished urn on the table beside him lent a sharper edge to Zhanil's letter.

In due time, Sephil knew he would have to summon Lahis and gently explain things to her. He would have to surrender Adeja's ashes to her and Arjuna. For now, he wanted to be alone with the man he loved, with the soft gray powder and fragments of bone: all that remained of what had once been a handsome, vital individual. It did not matter that Adeja had become a hero, gaining in death the recognition that eluded him in life. All that mattered was what he left behind.

"And you called *me* selfish," murmured Sephil.

If possible, he would have retired to his private shrine, lit candles, and meditated until the worst of his grief passed, but external events did not permit such indulgences. Within the hour, a second messenger came bearing a summons from the king. Sephil did not need to ask why his father-in-law wanted to see him. Throughout the campaign, messages had passed to and from the capital, borne by swift couriers, ensuring that Bhellin received news of the victory less than a fortnight after the battle at Cassiare. Sephil knew that Arzhati had been killed, and Kargil's injury now left a void on the throne of Rhodeen, a position which must be filled.

By now, most of the army had returned, while some remained abroad. That his son was staying behind in Rhodeen with Ettarin told Sephil that his brother-in-law, acting perhaps on orders from Ampheres, was backing Zhanil in a bid for the kingship.

"This must be done," said Ampheres. "If ever there is an opportunity for Zhanil to become king without bloodshed, it is now."

"Did he agree to this, or did you and Ettarin advance his cause without asking him?" asked Sephil.

The king's reply offered no real answer. "Zhanil knows what is best for him. By all accounts, he is doing his utmost to present a favorable countenance to the nobles and Turya elders."

Sephil shook his head. "He is only twenty, too young to become king."

"And that," replied Ampheres, "is why you will become king alongside him."

The thought of sitting on the throne in Tal Charne and wearing his father's crown was so preposterous that Sephil laughed. "You cannot be serious," he said. "My father never allowed me to sit on his council. I have no idea how the government works, and there has never been a joint kingship in Rhodeen."

"If you know that much, then it seems you are not as ignorant of affairs as you believe. In any case, I did not say you would actually rule." Ampheres turned to the valet by the door, gesturing for wine. "I know you have no desire to leave your ministry. But you will be crowned with Zhanil, to provide a living link with the old dynasty. After that, you may step aside and continue to advise Zhanil in secret, even overrule his decisions if you disagree. You might even return here to Bhellin after a suitable interval has passed."

Sephil stared at the cup of Besarian white the valet set before him. "I have no wish to leave Khalgar. As you said, I have my ministry here, and—"

"Rhodeen has a temple of Abh," said Ampheres. "I understand the Turyar regard his worship with great respect. As nominal king, you would have no trouble establishing a ministry in Shemin-at-Khul."

A half dozen arguments rose to Sephil's lips, from his unhappy childhood to his awkwardness among the Turyar, knowing that none would do him any good. "Ketalya might not wish to live in Rhodeen. She hardly speaks the language."

"She and Ellina will accompany you to Rhodeen for the coronation, but afterward they will return here," replied Ampheres. "When Zhanil becomes king, he will have to forfeit any properties he might have inherited as a prince of Khalgar. Those properties will, of course, pass to his sister. Ellina is young, and will need her mother's counsel and guidance in learning to manage her estates and choose an appropriate husband."

Sephil knew he could protest, even refuse outright, but in the end he would do as instructed. "You are assuming that Zhanil *will* become king."

Ampheres sipped at his wine. "There is little question that he will be elected. The Turya elders may wield considerable authority, but they are not the only faction with power in Rhodeen. Whoever is chosen must be agreeable to the Rhodeen nobility as well. Arzhati was able to maintain the peace by not alienating them. If Zhanil is perceptive enough to do the same and court both factions, he stands an excellent chance of being elected. And frankly, there *is* no one else with as strong a claim as his."

"Kargil could contest the election."

"The rather backward laws of the Turyar prohibit his succession, and it would seem he never bothered to ingratiate himself with the Rhodeen nobility," Ampheres pointed out. "Had he done so, he might have stood a better chance of overturning the Turya elders. No, he will not have the support needed to make himself king—or *turkan*, if that is what he prefers.

"As for the other claimants, your cousin Dashir presents little chance of opposition. He may have a claim at the title of Crown Prince, but you are Brasidios' only surviving son and your claim supersedes his. Furthermore, being associated with the defeated enemy is not going to help his cause. Zhanil may have to execute him to secure his reign, but we can discuss that option at a later time."

Now Sephil drank, if only to steady his nerves. He recalled the first and only execution he ever attended, and shuddered at the thought of Zhanil having to endure that ordeal. Dispensing justice went with being a ruler. Zhanil would have no choice. "Rhodeen may not like having a puppet king."

"Is that what you think, that I intend to annex Rhodeen as part of the Khalgari crown?" Ampheres gave a harsh little laugh. "Do not confuse me with Armajid. There is quite a difference between influencing the election of a king and ruling through him. You know very well that Zhanil was not raised to be my mouthpiece, and you and I both know he would not tolerate any attempt to make him thus. If Ettarin and I counsel him at this stage, it is because he is young and has been thrust into an unfamiliar situation in which he needs guidance.

"It will be several weeks, if not months, before a new king is chosen, so I advise you to take a more philosophical view of matters. In the meantime, tonight we are hosting a banquet in honor of the victory at Cassiare. I sent Ketalya an invitation this morning, but she did not indicate whether or not you would be attending."

Banquets did not agree with Sephil, but if his father-inlaw's plans came to fruition, he realized he would have to learn to endure them. "I will come, but on one condition."

"What is this: setting conditions over such a small matter?"

"I have good cause," replied Sephil. "I am not asking for much. Tonight you are going to announce the death of Prince Ninarsha, and perhaps offer a toast to Ettarin. No doubt you mean to give him the credit, though everyone knows he did not strike the fatal blow. My condition is this: I will attend, but you must give due credit to Adeja ked Shamuz. It must be a public gesture."

Although the king's expression did not change, Sephil heard him hiss between his teeth. "I have no time to waste on that foreign interloper."

I've given you twenty years of my life, and for what? So I can be snubbed by your high-and-mighty family, so I can be cast aside like so much shit when I'm too old and lame to be useful anymore? Sephil heard Adeja's complaint as clearly as if the man was sitting beside him. If I cannot do anything more for him, at least I can do this. "After more than twenty years, I hardly think Adeja is a foreigner. He spent more than two decades faithfully serving my family. He saved my life in Ottabia, and I do not know how many times he saved Zhanil's—"

"Yes, and we are all grateful for that."

"You say that," said Sephil, "but you do not mean it. No, he did not enlist as a proper Khalgari soldier, and he could be troublesome—I do not deny that. But what he gave me and my family, he paid for in blood. His parents were murdered by the High Prince, he nearly lost his only son to an assassin who mistook him for Zhanil, and he suffered serious injury in Rhodeen. Through all that, he never asked for anything—not for money or a promotion or public recognition. Would it hurt you just *once* to show your gratitude in public, just for his family's sake?"

Ampheres frowned. "You ask much."

"I do not think it is much to ask at all."

Another sharp, indrawn breath followed. "I will do as you request, Sephil, but after this we will never discuss the matter again."

Somehow, the victory felt superficial. Sephil returned to his apartments in a heavier mood than when he left, and with far more to consider than he had anticipated.

He placed the urn in a cabinet, then unlocked a compartment and removed a small inlaid box. Within, nestled on a bed of white velvet, lay the seal ring of the Crown Prince of Rhodeen, sent with him by his brother twenty-two years ago. Sephil contemplated it for a moment before lifting it out and sliding it onto his finger.

Even now, at forty-one, Sephil found the seal too large and heavy for his hand. A priest cannot wear this, only a prince who can defend his people. Removing the ring, he replaced it in its box. When the next courier left for Cassiare, he would send the seal to his son.

"I heard you wished to be alone," said Ketalya, standing in the doorway. "Piras told me you were praying."

"I was, then your father sent for me." Sephil closed the compartment and locked it. "I should send for Lahis, but I do not know how I will give her the news."

Ketalya came close, twining her arm around his. "You did what you could for him. It is not your fault that you could not save him." In a rare gesture of intimacy, she laid her chin on his shoulder. "Would it help if I were present? Sometimes only another woman can understand."

There had been a time when Ketalya would have nothing to do with Lahis, lowborn and simple. Two decades and Lahis'

gentle nature had softened her, or perhaps she merely sympathized with the woman for having to endure Adeja's mercurial moods. "Yes," murmured Sephil, "I think it would help."

* * * *

Zhanil realized early on that his protests availed him nothing. Arzhati was dead, Kargil disqualified from the succession, and, despite his youth and foreign birth, he was the best and most likely candidate to assume the kingship. If he did not press his claim now, the opportunity might be lost forever.

Walk away, he thought, *and you'll regret it for the rest of your life*.

Housed in a comfortable manor in Cassiare, his expenses paid for by a grateful city, he did his utmost to accept the situation and heed his uncle's advice. Within a week of arriving, he met with the governor of Cassiare and the Turya lords who enforced the *turkan's* laws, smiling and tempering his speech to project a regal, informed persona.

More than once, he regretted leaving behind the crimson coat Thano had given him. A remedy soon surfaced in the rich bolts of silk with which the governor presented him. Ettarin hired a tailor and several needlewomen, and soon Zhanil had a deep blue Turya coat embroidered at the cuffs and hem with stars. He wore it in public as often as possible, until people began to associate him with both the colors of the old dynasty and the newer Turya style. His dress said more about his political views than any carefully honed speech would have accomplished.

Winter settled on southeastern Rhodeen with rain and heavy fog rolling in from the ocean. The cold, wet weather meant Zhanil could not visit the silk farms or gardens for which Cassiare was famous, but in the evenings he dined at the tables of several influential Rhodeen and Turya lords.

Ettarin, who rarely attended these functions, coached him in making appropriate small talk. "I think you know by now that these men have not invited you to dine with them for the pleasure of your company. They are hoping to break your public façade and measure what type of man you truly are. Therefore, you wish to appear confident, but not arrogant. Do not use phrases like 'when I am king' or 'if I become king.' It makes you sound naïve, like you expect their support or are blatantly courting their favor."

Zhanil fingered the sable collar of the dark green brocade his uncle had chosen for him. "You ought to be there. It can't be pleasant for you, sitting here by yourself every night."

"These men are not interested in Khalgar, so my presence is neither necessarily nor particularly desirable," replied Ettarin. "The worst impression you can possibly give is to suggest that you are a Khalgari prince who takes his orders from his grandfather in Bhellin. Why do you think I did not order any garments for you in your mother's colors? No, I will stay here by the fire tonight and enjoy my book and the respite from my duties at home."

As his uncle could not advise him on how to approach the Turyar, Zhanil turned to Kalmeki, finding in his *keshka* a

wealth of knowledge and support without which he would have been lost.

"The Turyar want two things above all," said Kalmeki. Having dismissed the groom, he helped Zhanil with the green tunic's multiple closures, using the opportunity to a claim a moment of intimacy so long denied them. "They want a strong leader, and one who will respect their laws and gods."

"I think my respect for them should be obvious," replied Zhanil.

Kalmeki let his hands slowly slide down Zhanil's arm, smoothing the rich fabric, seeking out the gold buttons that fastened the sleeve. His touch was reassuring, even sensuous. "Your visit earlier in the year made a good impression, and your ties to *turkan* Arzhati speak well in your favor, as does your conduct at Meduin and in the most recent battle." His fingertips traced the edge of the sleeve before moving down to draw erotic circles in Zhanil's palm. "It is your youth and ties to the old dynasty that concern them."

Zhanil tried to ignore the sensations that light touch produced in him. "They would have had the same with Kargil."

"Kargil had no leanings toward the Rhodeen nobles," said Kalmeki. "The Turya lords are concerned that they may exert pressure on you. You may have noticed how the nobles are already trying to win concessions from you."

Had he not noticed before, Zhanil was confronted by the problem at that night's banquet, hosted by the governor. Irial Callios, a hawkish, fastidious man in his seventies, had served under both Arzhati and Brasidios. After the usual pleasantries, which ended as first course was being served, Irial turned the conversation toward politics.

"Being so young," he said, "you would not know what Rhodeen was like twenty-five years ago. That is not to say that things are better or worse, simply that life is rather ... *different* under Turya rule. When I was your age, we had the old dynastic solar cult. The laws were somewhat more lax, and the government in the capital not quite so—how shall I put it?—tribal."

He wants them gone, thought Zhanil, and wants to know where I stand. Even without his uncle to advise him, Zhanil recognized the trap well enough not to fall into it. "And yet, it seems the Turyar have brought some benefits to Rhodeen," he replied, taking care to maintain a neutral tone. "This is my third visit in two years, and everywhere I look I see signs of prosperity and peace. The people seem content with things as they are."

Irial made a dismissive gesture. "I am sure Arzhati was careful in what he allowed you to see."

"Perhaps, but as you may have heard, my first visit was unannounced," replied Zhanil. "In many places I have observed that the Turyar have intermarried with the local population. After twenty-two years, they have become firmly entrenched in Rhodeen society."

"Rhodeen is not an extension of the Turya-lands," said another lord. "Arzhati and his son always behaved as though it were so, bringing in high-ranking Turyar to replace our positions at court."

"Thank the gods for ensuring Kargil never rules over us," answered Irial. "He would have turned all of us out of our estates and given them to herdsmen who only know how to live in yurts."

Throughout this exchange, Zhanil remained keenly aware of Kalmeki's presence beside him. For his part, Kalmeki neither said nor did anything to indicate he noticed the affront, but lent a polite ear to the conversation as he ate. Zhanil held his tongue at the temptation to snap at the men to remember the present company, for he knew they were not only aware, but meant their comments to be heard.

"Gentlemen, we should not speak of such unpleasant things," he said, forcing a smile. "Since the weather does not permit me to visit the silk farms, you will have to tell me about the trade. I know that on several occasions Khalgar has attempted to cultivate silkworms, but without the same success."

Irial did not bother to conceal his smile. "Khalgar is already famous for its fine carpets and wines, and its engineers. It should not strive to compete with its allies."

"Of course not," agreed Zhanil, "but would Rhodeen refuse the opportunity to bring some of those skills you just listed into its land?"

"What do you mean?" asked the lord on Irial's left.

"On your last visit to Shemin-at-Khul, did you not notice the condition of the walls, or the roads leading down into the valley?"

Irial shook his head. "Arzhati was like a boy playing with a mason's trowel. The Turyar know nothing about dwelling in

cities. Why should they think they have the skill or even right to repair them?"

"At least they made the attempt." In low, even tones, Kalmeki finally spoke. "As I understand it, the work was done by Rhodeen masons, who were grateful for the employment. If the result is not satisfactory, then at least it is not permanent."

"As I was saying," continued Irial, without looking at Kalmeki, "the work should have been done by professionals."

Zhanil knotted his fists under the table at the insult. "Khalgari engineers could train your masons to replicate and even improve upon the old stonework. In addition, you could benefit from improved roads. I understand that travel to and from the capital is quite difficult at this time of year."

"And you are proposing to have Khalgar do all this work?"

"No, I am proposing that Khalgar train your people in the techniques to allow them to do the work themselves," said Zhanil. "I myself know how to lay down roads. Every man who serves in the army spends time working for the engineer corps, so the method is no secret. It is something to consider."

Ettarin was already in bed when Zhanil and Kalmeki returned to the house. As before, Kalmeki helped Zhanil with the buttons and fastenings of his tunic. His earlier playfulness had vanished.

"They shouldn't have treated you like that," said Zhanil.

Kalmeki did not meet his eyes. "It is common. You did not see it before because Arzhati kept you away from such men, but things here are not quite as you imagine them to be. Even what you said about the common people is not entirely true. Not all of them are willing to intermarry with the Turyar or accept them as neighbors."

"You should have told me this before." Zhanil began plucking at the buttons along his sleeve. "Let me do that."

"No, I have it."

"Kalmeki, you never let me do anything for you."

"I have never needed to ask you for anything," replied Kalmeki.

"No," said Zhanil, "I think you're proud and used to doing things for yourself. If someone hurt you, I don't think you'd ever tell me."

Kalmeki looked up at him, his gaze as hard as his voice. "If someone truly hurt me," he said, "I would put an arrow between their eyes and be done with it. I did not tell you because what is now will not always be. These old men are nothing, simply bitter relics of a time that no longer exists. One day they will die, new men will come, and in a hundred years all this will not matter anymore."

* * * *

Among the other candidates, Zhanil heard several Turya names, which did not trouble him as greatly as the occasional mention of his cousin Dashir. The old ghost of Dashir's claim to the title of Crown Prince resurfaced, especially among those who did not favor the prospect of a king born and raised outside Rhodeen. These men were unconcerned that Dashir had allied himself with Tajhaan, and were apparently willing to forgive the recent bloodshed in exchange for what they considered a proper ruler.

Zhanil saw to it that Dashir had no opportunity to encourage his supporters, or even learn of their existence. He and his son occupied comfortable yet secure rooms on the top floor of the manor house, with no access to news or messages from the outside. Zhanil visited them every four or five days to make certain they remained content, cooperative, and aware of his presence.

Nurad was a shy sixteen-year-old interested in books and languages, and offered no trouble. Zhanil paid little attention to him. On the other hand, Dashir was a complete cipher. He was a calm, reserved man in his forties, who observed everything yet did not speak unless addressed. Zhanil could not decide if his demeanor stemmed from a genuine fear for his life, or was a long-standing habit.

For practical reasons, neither father nor son had been allowed to attend Ninarsha's funeral, but afterward Zhanil brought Dashir the urn containing his ashes. "You do not appear to mourn his death."

Dashir held the urn, carefully turning it over in his hands. Several minutes passed before he spoke. "Ninarsha belonged more to his grandfather than to me," he said softly. "We were not close."

"And yet you struck down the man who killed him."

"He was still my flesh and blood." Setting the urn down on the table beside him, Dashir let his gaze fall to the floor. "When you have children, you will understand that."

While the weather remained agreeable, Ettarin had sent most of the army home, retaining a token force of a hundred men befitting his status as Crown Prince. Both he and Zhanil sent regular messages, the former to his wife and father, and Zhanil to his parents, steward, and a few others.

Zhanil took his uncle's advice in selecting the most trusted courier to deliver Adeja's ashes to his father; it seemed less traumatic than sending them directly to Lahis, and he knew that Sephil would be gentle in telling her the news. With the urn, Zhanil sent a letter for Lahis and Arjuna, describing Adeja's valor in battle and glossing over any unpleasant details. He closed by regretting his inability to share their loss in person, and offered whatever comfort he could.

Despite the fog and drizzle, messages duly arrived from Khalgar. Zhanil welcomed letters from his parents, yet when Ettarin presented him with a packet from the king, he did not know what to think. Ampheres never addressed more than twenty words to him at a time, yet now he received four pages, all written in his grandfather's own hand.

Before now, Zhanil had not considered the possibility, yet he realized now that if he became king, he and his grandfather would be peers as well as blood relations.

Ampheres wasted little ink on courtesies. Between admonishments to avoid bragging and other unsuitable behaviors, he doled out advice. On rainy afternoons, Zhanil read the letters aloud to Kalmeki, listening to his friend's opinion while pondering his grandfather's words.

"He has been a ruler for a very long time," said Kalmeki. "You should ask for more of his advice." Zhanil sighed. "Oh, I'm sure he'll send it without being asked."

"You do not sound pleased to receive it."

"Don't tell me that the Turyar *like* having their elders constantly telling them what to do?"

Kalmeki's face, made golden by the firelight, revealed no expression. "In the evenings, the elders speak and the young listen. If a young warrior decides he knows better and ignores the advice given to him, he soon learns his mistake. I told you once before, the Turya-lands are no place for fools. I imagine kingship in these eastern lands is very much the same, in that a ruler who does not listen to his advisors or who constantly blunders will soon be overthrown."

Zhanil sagged back against the cushions. "Just because I don't always feel like doing as I'm told doesn't make me a fool."

"You asked about the Turyar," said Kalmeki, "not what I thought about you."

From his father, Zhanil received more personal letters, as well as a gift. On an afternoon when the downpour flooded the streets three inches deep, Amset arrived from Bhellin bearing a small inlaid box. "Your father wouldn't entrust it to anyone else," he said.

While the servants brought mulled wine and a warm robe to replace Amset's drenched clothing, Zhanil opened the box. Inside, a sapphire the size of a man's thumbnail winked against white velvet. "My father doesn't wear jewelry like this," he said, carefully lifting the ring from its bed.

"That is your uncle's seal ring," replied Amset, "the ring of the Crown Prince of Rhodeen. Your father's instructions are that you're to wear it."

Zhanil rubbed his finger over the cabochon, tracing the outline of the royal Sun. There were words also, very tiny, encircling the edges, but in the poor light he could not read them. He had not expected this physical connection with his uncle, the other Zhanil, and for a long moment could only sit there with the ring nestled in his palm, conscious of its weight.

At last, he yielded and slid the ring onto his index finger, where it fit snugly. Amset nodded his approval, as did Kalmeki and Ettarin, who came in from the study when he learned that a courier had arrived.

"You must wear it in public," he said.

"Isn't it a bit premature?" asked Zhanil.

"As your grandfather's only surviving son, your father is the legitimate Crown Prince," explained Ettarin. "And yes, I am aware of the situation with Dashir, but over the years it has become clear that when your cousin received his title, Brasidios was not aware that your father was still alive. Your direct bloodline and possession of the royal seal mean far more in the eyes of your potential subjects than an uninformed ruling made in haste more than twenty years ago."

Zhanil began wearing the ring in public, gauging the reactions of the Rhodeen nobles who recognized it. After a few days, he became accustomed to its slight weight, and forgot its presence when he visited Dashir. Only when he saw his cousin's pained look and the direction of his gaze did Zhanil grasp what the ring meant to him.

"So much strife and bloodshed, and for such a little thing," murmured Dashir.

For a moment, Zhanil contemplated concealing his hand, but decided against it. "You weren't affected by such scruples when you were in Tajhaan."

"You say that because you do not understand my position there," replied Dashir. "The truth is I was as much a prisoner under my father-in-law as I am now under you. I never supported the raids into Rhodeen. I never forgot that this was my home and these were my people. But I never had any say in what was done in my name. Armajid saw Rhodeen as an inferior land, simply as one more territory to add to Tajhaan. What did it matter to him how many peasants he killed or mutilated when he was willing to do the same to his own people?"

Adeja's parents came to mind. Zhanil swiftly quashed the memory. "Then he meant to annex Rhodeen?"

Dashir nodded. "That is why he kept Ninarsha so close, rearing him as a Tajhaani prince, filling his ears with poison and promises. Had we been victorious, my son would have become a puppet king in Shemin-at-Khul. You must understand, I wanted so badly to love and respect Ninarsha, but he was such a fool, such an arrogant little fool. He never grasped the truth. All he saw was the promise of a throne, and men calling him king. There was never any discussion of my becoming king, even though my claim took precedence." Once again, his gaze fell on the ring. "You remind me so much of your Uncle Zhanil. I had no idea a mouse like Sephil would produce such a lion."

"I am not yet king," said Zhanil.

"But you will be," Dashir answered heavily. "I have no news from outside, so I can only imagine what is happening. There has surely been talk of other candidates, but it is only a formality. Arzhati is dead, and from what I have heard Kargil is barred from the throne. Now that I am a prisoner, there is no one else with as strong a claim as yours."

The last thing Zhanil intended to do was discuss the odds with his prisoner and former rival, a man who, if he had not actually sent assassins to Bhellin, nevertheless had profited from their success. "In all these weeks," he said, "you haven't once asked for word about your sister."

Dashir let his gaze fall to the floor. "I abandoned her and our mother so I could escape. What more can I say, except that I am not proud of what I did."

"If you ask, Thano may forgive you."

"I do not expect I will have the opportunity to see her again, though I would like to write to her if that is allowed. I would also ask your father to forgive me my past indiscretions," said Dashir. "I was very cruel to him when we were young."

"You can ask him yourself when he arrives."

Startled, Dashir looked up. "Sephil is coming here?"

"He will be here in the spring," replied Zhanil, "once the weather permits. That means that, unless there is some incident, you will remain alive at least until then."

"A nobleman is entitled to the headman's sword," said Dashir. His voice grew distant, as though he had already been told he was about to die and was prepared for it. "My only wish is that my son lives and does not have to watch me die. He is no threat to you or anyone."

On the subject of Nurad, Zhanil was not prepared to make concessions, though, in view of the youth's illegitimacy, he thought execution was unlikely. "If you want him to live in Rhodeen, then he must learn the language and change his name."

"Nurad already speaks the language fluently," answered Dashir, "and as for his name, I called him after my father. In Rhodeen, *Nurad* would be *Serril*. It means 'light of the land.'"

Zhanil froze, remembering a long-ago prophecy concerning a young man with such a name. Then he shook his head, dismissing the idea as absurd. "I think it best that he learns to answer to it."

That evening, sifting through his thoughts over supper, Zhanil recalled a question that had long troubled him. "Uncle," he said to Ettarin, "tell me why my grandfather Brasidios neglected his western defenses."

Ettarin frowned over his soup, pondering the question. "I do not have a direct answer for you, but my father was of the opinion that since he and Brasidios so thoroughly defeated the Turyar at the Irrend Pass, Brasidios must have believed there was no need to man garrisons on a harmless frontier."

"The defeat was not as thorough as they believed," said Kalmeki. "There were many more warriors who did not go to battle that day, and those who were too young or not yet born. Arzhati and Lazphi were but children at Hapaniku at the time."

"So it seems," answered Ettarin, "and my father was wise enough to realize it." He turned back to Zhanil. "Brasidios was stubborn and would not hear anything more on the subject."

The door opened, admitting Amset. "Forgive me for interrupting, but I think you need to hear this."

"What is it?" asked Zhanil.

"Come out into the foyer and listen. They're out on the street in front of the house."

Ettarin set down his fork. "Who is outside?"

Amset did not explain, and the grin on his face only deepened the mystery. "Just come."

Zhanil heard the commotion the moment he stepped out of the dining room. Hundreds of voices, calling out from the street; it was not until he entered the foyer that the cacophony assumed the form of his name. Through the windows he saw them, nobles and ordinary citizens standing in front of the house, oblivious to the light drizzle, chanting his name.

"What is it?" he asked Ettarin.

Surprise widened his uncle's eyes. "There has been no word from the capital, no official word—" Words failed him. "They are calling for you, Zhanil. You had better open the door before they tear it down."

Trembling with uncertainty, not knowing whether the crowd meant to cheer him or tear him to pieces, Zhanil undid the latch, turned the knob, and stepped out into the damp twilight.

The noise swelled at his appearance. Zhanil looked over their heads, down the street in either direction; there was seemingly no end to the mass of people waving guttering torches and chanting his name, his father's name and the word *king*. Like a wave, the front ranks dropped to their knees, followed by those behind.

Zhanil shivered at the fine drizzle falling on his head and shoulders, at the sight of so many strangers doing him homage. He wanted to tell them to get up, to return to their homes where it was warm, but with the thick cloak his uncle draped around him, he heard Ettarin murmuring at him to smile. "Give them this moment, Zhanil. They have waited more than twenty years for it."

As the silence of homage descended on the crowd, a commotion began at the rear. In the dim light, Zhanil saw Turyar jostling through the ranks, shouting in their own language. He froze, not knowing whether they meant to do him violence or show respect.

At last, he understood their shouts. "Kalmeki," he said, without turning around, "why are they calling for you?"

Kalmeki took his place on the steps, his broad grin like sunshine. "They are not," he answered. "It is you they want. They are calling out to you, the little star, their new *turkan*."

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Chapter Twenty-Two

The doors opened onto a hall floored in dazzling white marble. Zhanil looked down a long aisle to the dais at the opposite end, and the tall, stained glass panel set into the wall. Lit from behind, the royal Sun cast gold and amber rays onto a marble throne wide enough for a giant.

"This is where the king is crowned," said Sephil, "and where he holds formal court."

Zhanil stepped into the hall, followed by his father and the officials who were intent on guiding them through the necessary rituals. Like the tombs below, this part of Tal Charne had not been touched in more than two decades, its silent corridors heavy with cobwebs and rat nests, the regalia it housed either destroyed or allowed to fall into disuse. An inventory of the royal treasury yielded only a few moth-eaten robes and some scattered ornaments overlooked by its Turya plunderers. A new crown would have to be made.

Tailors, jewelers, and goldsmiths descended on Cassiare. Measurements were taken, and orders placed for gold, silver, jewels and rich fabrics. Zhanil viewed sketches and swatches of brocade and velvet, bombarded with so many details he did not know where to begin. For two days he suffered, until his father and cousin Thano, who corresponded with them from the capital, appointed stewards to oversee the preparations. "A king does not have time to spend on such trivial things," said Sephil. "Inform your stewards of your preferences, then let them see to the rest."

Until he saw the massive throne in Tal Charne, Zhanil had puzzled over the logistics of a double coronation. Would his father be crowned first, and then step down to let him take precedence? How would that look, one king sitting while the other stood off to the side? Now, stepping up to the dais and trying the throne, whose hard seat would need cushions, he laughed in relief. "There's room for us both."

Sephil stood at the foot of the dais, quietly contemplating the throne. His calm baffled the officials, who could not comprehend why he did not show more enthusiasm over the coming coronation. Zhanil knew he had not yet informed them that he intended to be crowned as king in name only.

Within days of his official election, Zhanil decided upon two coronations, one the traditional Rhodeen ceremony in Tal Charne, the other the tribal investiture of the *turkan*. Kalmeki briefly described the Turya ritual, which seemed to include feats of horsemanship, archery, and drinking prodigious amounts of kumiss. "You see," he said, "this is why Kargil cannot become *turkan*. He cannot demonstrate his fitness to rule."

"I hope your people realize I'm not very skilled with the Turya composite bow," said Zhanil.

"Arrangements can be made for you to shoot with your own bow," replied Kalmeki. "As long as you strike the target, we will be satisfied." Spring brought warmer weather and an end to the incessant rain that had swollen the Khul, making river travel impossible. A royal barge now arrived from the capital, outfitted with amenities to ensure the three-day trip was a luxurious one. Zhanil installed Dashir and his son in a confined cabin below deck, allowing them an hour's exercise in the open air each evening at sunset. Sephil avoided contact with them, spending his hours reading indoors, emerging only when the barge passed river settlements whose people lined the banks to watch the new kings sail past.

"Wave to them, Father," said Zhanil. "They're cheering for you, too."

"They do not even know me."

At the moment of his triumph, Zhanil could not understand why his father sounded so resigned and disinterested. He knew Sephil had agreed to the double kingship only when prodded by Ampheres, and only for the purpose of strengthening Zhanil's own claim, yet as the days passed it became increasingly obvious that he did not like Rhodeen and wanted to return to Bhellin.

Sephil refused to address the subject, and Zhanil remained at a loss until they arrived in the capital. Thano greeted them on the palace steps, and installed them in adjoining royal suites. She arranged everything within the domestic sphere, visiting twice a day to make certain her kinsmen wanted for nothing.

"My father is not happy to be here," said Zhanil.

Thano nodded. "You must be patient with him," she said. "He does not have pleasant memories of his childhood here. In time, perhaps his feelings will change."

Zhanil knew the forced separation from his mother and sister would not help. They would come for the coronation, but family life would never again be as it had been. "If I had not come with the army, this might not have happened."

"As long as Arzhati died and Kargil was prevented from taking the throne, you would have been the likely successor," said Thano. "Perhaps it might have taken longer, and more effort on your part, but I think in the end the result would have been the same."

"I hope you are not bitter about Kargil. It was never my intention—"

Thano waved his protests aside. "A Turya wife and mother learns to accept these things. I am aware that your last meeting with Kargil was not a pleasant one. I apologize for his behavior."

"It is not your fault," said Zhanil.

"Arzhati and I tried hard to instill a love of both peoples in him, but in the end he chose his own path. As a mother, I wish it had been different, but I am not disappointed to see you on the throne. Kargil has returned to his grandfather's court at Hapaniku, so you will not see him. He still has his thumb and is trying to learn how to hold a bow again; a special one has been made for him. Perhaps I should not say this, but I think he is happier where he is."

* * * *

Sephil could not comprehend why the masses insisted on cheering his arrival in Shemin-at-Khul when they did not even know him. All those years when my family despised me and shut me away, did you care about me then? I was never anything to you, except the prince whose name no one ever remembered. Why should now be any different?

His reaction was not becoming of a priest of Abh, but the moment went deeper than his vocation, touching on emotions years of meditation had failed to expel.

Sephil submitted for Zhanil's sake, wearing a polite face for those surviving lords who had ignored him as a youth, nodding at their courtesies without really listening. Sometimes he imagined Adeja standing at his elbow, rolling his eyes at the insincerity of it all.

What would you have made of my becoming king? he wondered. Sephil IX. His official title sounded unreal to his own ears, as though he were reading about one of his own ancestors.

In the mornings, he endured fittings, rehearsals, and meetings with Zhanil and the officials appointed to guide him through the ceremonies, but in the afternoons he escaped to the house of Abh, one of the few religious houses left untouched by the Turyar. The priests had heard of his Khalgari ministry and were genuinely eager to receive his royal patronage.

And to think, he reflected, looking out on the temple's serene reflecting pool, *I once came here to die*.

One more duty remained, one which he had dreaded since learning the details of the battle at Cassiare, yet it must be done.

Dashir was a faded reflection of his youth, somber and prematurely gray. "I did not expect to see you wearing a priest's robes," he said quietly. A book lay open on the pillow beside him. His son was not present.

"You knew that I was a priest of Abh," replied Sephil.

Dashir nodded. "Yes, I heard you had a ministry in Bhellin, but I always assumed it was nothing more than Khalgari propaganda. It was not something I ever expected from you."

"I know you claim to have been a pawn of the High Prince. Zhanil does not know you as I do." Sephil seated himself in a nearby chair. "He has described his conversations with you, but I find it difficult to believe you are as contrite as you claim. Do you honestly expect me to believe that you had no part in trying to kill me or my family?"

Dashir looked away, staring at the floor, his lap, anywhere but the man questioning him. Zhanil had described him as sad and defeated, and the priest in Sephil grudgingly began to acknowledge that it might yet be true.

"Those first attempts on your life in Ottabia, I agreed to those." Dashir spoke softly, his voice barely audible. "I said nothing about the initial attempts to kill Zhanil in the nursery, but after that, after the raids started in Rhodeen and my son was old enough to be groomed by his grandfather, then it was different. Then I understood what a terrible bargain I had made." Had it been his life alone, Sephil might have extended his hands and forgiven him then, but the father in him could never excuse the long years of uncertainty and paranoia in the nursery. "You realize," he said coldly, "that I have the authority to have you executed."

"As a priest of Abh, you might wish to let your son sign the death warrant."

"Now is not the time for you to be facetious, Dashir. You are no longer in a position to mock me."

Dashir looked at him. "I do not expect mercy from you or Zhanil. I am not even certain that I want it. But do not put me to death for things that happened more than twenty years ago."

"You have no idea how many people you have injured."

To his surprise, Dashir covered his face and began to weep. "Yes, I *do* know."

It took all Sephil's will to sit calmly while the storm passed, and even then the priest in him wanted to go to his cousin and offer words of comfort.

With a few final courtesies, Sephil took his leave and returned to his apartments, feeling no more at peace now than when he had first arrived. Seeing his cousin again, confronting him, had not eased any of the ghosts Sephil associated with Rhodeen.

Ketalya, who had arrived from Bhellin with Ellina only days before, drew him aside the moment she noticed his distress. "I know you have not been happy here," she said. "Perhaps you should not tarry and return home with us after the coronation." Knotting one hand into a fist, Sephil laid it on the edge of the terrace. Unlike his old apartments, these provided a generous view of Tal Charne and the river. Right now, however, the Pyramid of the Sun was the last thing he wished to see. "It would have been enough to see Zhanil crowned. For some bizarre reason, your father seems to believe I should become king as well."

"He believes you should claim your birthright."

"I was never officially part of the succession," Sephil replied, "and he knows that. And all those elderly hypocrites fawning over me, they know it, too. My father never would have tolerated my becoming king."

"Sephil," Ketalya said gently, "he is not here now. It does you no good to dwell on the past."

Not wanting to argue, he sighed. "If there were any legitimate reason for my being crowned, perhaps I would feel differently, but Zhanil is not a child who requires a regent. At this point, he is far better prepared to assume power than I am."

"Rhodeen wishes to pretend that Arzhati never existed. Thano has already told me that the priests of the Sun who keep the dynasty scrolls will replace your name with his."

Sephil laughed harshly. "I think the Turyar who live here will have something to say about that. As much as I want to return home, part of me hates the thought of leaving Zhanil here alone."

To his surprise, Ketalya chuckled. "How long do you think it will be before his advisors find him a wife? He will be too preoccupied attending to affairs of state and breeding heirs to

be homesick. I will miss him, but I am more concerned with you, Sephil. You must understand, Father only thought to—"

"I know what he thought," said Sephil, "but sometimes even he is mistaken."

* * * *

Zhanil went so far as to have one of his ministers draw up a death warrant, but in the end he decided not to affix his signature. "I hate to use religion as a punishment," he told his father, "but find Dashir some remote sanctuary in Khalgar, as far removed from the border as possible, and let him sit there for the rest of his life."

Sentiment had little to do with his mercy. Although he did not wish to begin his reign in blood as the princes of Tajhaan customarily did, Zhanil had more practical concerns. Spring brought emissaries from the south with the news that Armajid had died of a seizure late in the autumn. His son Mahtal, the new High Prince, desired improved relations with his neighbors in Rhodeen and Khalgar, and was prepared to offer substantial concessions in order to obtain it.

"It appears Tajhaan misses its former trading partners," said Zhanil. "Mahtal has a niece—several, in fact—but he is persistent to the point of being obnoxious in pressing Dashir's eldest daughter on me."

Sephil nodded. "It is a politically expedient match. The princess is your second cousin."

It might be the wisest course, and the one he would ultimately take, but what was politically expedient did not necessarily appeal to Zhanil. A royal marriage with Tajhaan meant he would be executing his own father-in-law, which he could not do, and did nothing to ease the potential groom's apprehensions. "Who is to say she will not try to poison me or stab me in the back on our wedding night?"

"I am sure Mahtal will explain to her that such conduct is unacceptable," said Sephil. "If he does not, then Thano and your mother will make certain she understands."

"She does not speak a word of our language."

Whatever sympathy Zhanil might have expected from his father failed to materialize. Sephil remained firm. "At some point, you must marry. You might wed the daughter of one of your nobles, as many kings of Rhodeen have done in the past, but I think it would be far wiser for you to take a foreign princess as your wife. Unfortunately, you are too closely related to your cousins in Khalgar, and from what I understand, a Turya bride would alienate half your subjects."

Zhanil stared at the letter lying on his desk amid a nest of other papers; his advisors were already shaking their heads at his penchant for clutter. Because Zhanil could not read Tajhaani, Mahtal had sent his words in translation: *take the daughter of our brother-in-law as your wife and through this union let us make peace between us*. "Her name is Saraji. She will have to take a royal name if she is to become queen."

"I had little choice when it came to marrying your mother," said Sephil. "We have had our moments, but we have learned to be content together. I know this princess is not the bride you want, yet I think if you are both willing to try, you may find happiness where you least expect it." What Zhanil truly wanted was a woman like Kalmeki, knowing even then that no one else could complete him in the same way. Did other *keshkai* experience such pangs when their time came to marry, or were they wiser, their culture having taught them what to expect?

"She cannot be Kalmeki for you," said Sephil, as though reading his thoughts.

Were his inmost desires so apparent, his disappointment so easily marked? Such openness was unacceptable in a king, even when he sat alone with his own father. "No one can be like Kalmeki," Zhanil replied.

Sephil, leaning close, softened his voice. "And no one can replace Adeja, not even your mother, but there are many kinds of love, and you may find there is a place in your heart for more than one person."

* * * *

"So you intend to make me into a priest of Abh?" asked Dashir. "You are not going to execute me?"

On this point, Sephil corrected him. "You will become a servant in the god's house. Whether you choose to enter the priesthood is only for you to say. The sanctuary to which you will go is one I have visited. It is in the hills north of Bhellin, isolated but not uncomfortable. Your life there will be a hard, simple one of work and study. You will have no visitors, and no communication with the outside world, though if you behave well you may occasionally receive letters from your children."

That morning, Dashir had received the news that Armajid had died during the autumn, and that Mahtal was sending Saraji to become Zhanil's wife. "Nurad will cause you no trouble," he said, "but my daughter is another matter. Saraji is just like her mother: a beautiful face with a sharp tongue. I know you do not wish to hear about such long-ago, unhappy things, but be grateful you did not marry Terreh."

Sephil made no answer, which came as no surprise. Dashir could not blame him for his suspicion, for when had he ever spoken to Sephil except to mock him? Making amends had been easier with Thano, who forgave him the moment she saw him.

"Arzhati sent messengers to Tajhaan," she said. "He wanted to be reconciled with you for my sake and Kargil's."

"I was never told about them," he answered. With a minder at the door, they sat together for hours, reflecting on the last two decades. Thano asked about his wives and children, while Dashir expressed only vague curiosity about his nephew. From what little he had heard, Kargil might have mixed blood, but his loyalties lay entirely with the Turyar.

Zhanil Sephides was altogether different, a Khalgari prince taught to speak the language and value the customs of Rhodeen from an early age, a man who did not discriminate between the two disparate peoples he now ruled. Dashir rued that Ninarsha had not been raised in that manner, as a prince worthy of his heritage, rather than as a mere pawn.

I wanted so much to love him, he thought, but I hated what he was. He was young and strong, and could have been so much more. In some ways, Dashir was grateful he had not

been allowed to attend the funeral, for the tears he would have shed would have been ones of profound regret. Instead, he wept in private, where even Nurad could not see him. *I* was not a proper father to him, and now we have all paid for *it*.

"Sephil," he said, "when will you learn to forgive me? I have had twenty years and more to watch the desert outside my palace prison and think about the things I have done. I deserve to be punished only for the things I have done, not for cruel, childish jests I made at your expense twenty-five or thirty years ago. As I recall, when you caused that scandal, you begged your father for forgiveness because you were young and foolish. You forget that you were not the only one who was young once, and thoughtless."

Several moments passed before Sephil spoke. "That," he replied, "is the first thing you have said that I actually believe."

"I do not know whether to be hurt or pleased."

"Do not expect me to love you," said Sephil, "or even call you my friend."

"I have become accustomed to a life without friends."

His comment drew a sharp frown from Sephil. "You are being facetious again."

"No," replied Dashir, "I am telling you the truth. As long as your dislike does not extend to Nurad, I can bear it."

"He is still a boy," said Sephil, "and regardless of my feelings for you, I know how to be fair."

Even a surrogate offering the warmest assurances would not have made the separation any easier. "Of course. It is

only that—" Dashir caught himself before he could lose his composure. "You will allow me to see him before I leave?"

For the first time, Sephil's expression softened. "You forget that I am a father also, Dashir."

* * * *

The coronation morning dawned clear and cool. Zhanil regarded the temperate weather as a favorable omen, since it would not add to the discomfort he must already endure under the weight of his robes. His deep blue mantle, edged with pearls and white fox fur, needed a groom to bear the train, while the brocade garments underneath yielded so many fastenings and so much stiff embroidery that he might as well have been a horse trussed in harness.

In contrast, his father wore blazing white robes whose severe cut and minimal adornment served to remind everyone that he was more a priest than a king.

At midmorning, the procession moved out from the palace to Tal Charne, through narrow streets thronged with so many cheering spectators that Zhanil had to calm his nervous mount before proceeding. Once indoors, he fared little better, as the hall of the kings, once so immense, scarcely offered enough room for a man to move or breathe.

With all eyes on him, Zhanil endured the anointing, the swearing of the Twenty Oaths, and the crowning. The weight and heat of his robes threatened to suffocate him, and the crown pressed into his temples hard enough to give him a headache; he maintained a neutral face, while within his body ached in protest. Beside him, his father sat silently, having yielded the crown, scepter, and ceremonial sword within moments of receiving them.

Afterward, in the tiring chamber, Zhanil practically threw off his groom's hands in his haste to tear off the constricting robes. Layers of velvet, brocade, and silk came away, until he stood shivering in his sweat-soaked undergarments. He bathed, dressed in lighter, more comfortable finery, and went down to the banquet where his nobles awaited him.

Sephil met him on the balcony overlooking the hall, still clad in white with a golden coronet matching Zhanil's own. "That went well," he murmured.

Zhanil leaned close. "Did you design the royal regalia?"

The crown of kings, like the sword and scepter, was on its way back to the treasury, but Zhanil had held it in his hands long enough to examine it. No reproduction of its lost predecessor, the crown was studded with topazes, carnelians, and pearls, its eight panels engraved with silver stars.

At last, he had his crown of stars. If he had not noticed, numerous observers stood ready to point it out to him.

"I am no artist," replied Sephil. "I saw the sketches, no more. Come, let us go down. They will not serve the banquet until we arrive, and the guests will not appreciate our tarrying here."

Still fighting his headache, Zhanil drank sparingly and avoided all attempts to draw him into a discussion of politics; there would be plenty of time for that in a few days, when his reign officially began. Already the Rhodeen nobles opposed his plan to improve the kingdom's antiquated system of roads. Importing Khalgari engineers did not sit well with them, even after Zhanil pointed out that their role would be to train native engineers, not do the work themselves.

Before they would support any new venture, the nobles demanded concessions. Expelling the Turyar was out of the question, but Zhanil was willing to give the Rhodeen lords equal representation in what had previously been a Turyadominated regime. *They may have the bloodright*, he thought, *but the Turyar still have the strength of arms, and any king who makes an enemy of them is a fool*.

A more pressing problem loomed with the expatriated nobles who, with the restoration of the old dynasty, were already petitioning to have their estates returned to them. Zhanil had no intention of evicting the present Turya lords. In some cases, compromise could be achieved through marriage, but in others, the dispossessed nobles would either have to accept lands elsewhere or remain as they were, as permanent exiles.

For now, he enjoyed the company of his family, and ignored pointed queries about Dashir, who had not been allowed to attend the coronation for the potential threat he still posed. His son, however, was another matter. Nurad now lived under close but benevolent scrutiny in Sephil's household. To help ease the painful separation from his father, Sephil brought Nurad out of seclusion and gave him a place at the high table, where he sat between Ketalya and Ettarin.

"Like it or not," said Sephil, "he is a member of the family, and we cannot ignore him. I know all too well what comes of that. If we treat him with kindness, he will be more likely to cooperate."

Zhanil raised no objections. In order to downplay his royal status, Nurad would keep his given name, and would finish his education under Sephil's supervision in the sanctuary of Abh in Bhellin. Nurad seemed pleased at the prospect of becoming a priest or scribe. "I did not like being a prince very much," he said quietly.

Late in the afternoon, Zhanil noticed his sister studying the newcomer with great interest, and then, to his horror, Nurad shyly returning her gaze, blushing a little when she smiled.

This is not going to happen. Zhanil set his teeth, biting back the temptation to reprimand them. Ellina would marry a great lord worthy of her wealth and title. For all his royal blood, Nurad was the illegitimate son of a traitor, with no lands or assets to recommend him.

Ellina likes boys, as any girl her age does. Once, she had made moon-eyes at Arjuna, and then at a third cousin who had no interest in a silly teenage girl. Nurad was a curiosity, nothing more. She probably had never even spoken to him beyond a few words.

The banquet ended late. By the time Zhanil retired to his apartments, he was so weary he could scarcely keep his head up. From his terrace, he could see distant bonfires and hear the muted celebrations of the populace throughout the city.

"They already love you, my king," commented the groom.

Zhanil held up his arm so the young man could unlace the sleeve. "Rather, they love the bounty of free wine and cakes I have provided."

Once free of his formal attire, Zhanil dismissed the servants so he could enjoy some privacy before bed. As they left, Kalmeki entered the room. In the strange, hybrid world Arzhati had created in Shemin-at-Khul, the king's *keshka* needed no permission to enter the royal apartments, but might come or go as he pleased without comment.

Kalmeki took his place behind the divan. Zhanil started to ask him to sit down when he felt strong hands on his shoulders, kneading tired muscles. Pain mingled with pleasure, and he groaned with relief. "Gods, if this is what being king is like, I'll be dead before I'm forty."

"Perhaps you will like being turkan better."

"That ceremony was a joy compared with what I had to endure today."

"That is because your people insist on making things more complicated than they need to be," observed Kalmeki.

Fingers brushed aside his hair, and soft lips touched the nape of his neck. Zhanil sighed, craving more. He reached up, catching Kalmeki's hand, and locked fingers with him. As a prince, he would have been willing to risk greater intimacy, but a king had no expectation of privacy; he stood to lose too much should the truth ever be known.

"You know I will stay with you," said Kalmeki. "The gods have willed this."

"I know."

Kalmeki laughed. "Ah, but there are still some things you do not know. Who do you think it was who found you lying wounded at Meduin and carried you back?"

Zhanil looked up at him. "Is that truly so?"

Kalmeki answered with his mouth, drawing Zhanil into a deep kiss that begged greater contact. Yet necessity meant their intimacies would be no more than a few stolen kisses, the suggestive brush of fingertips, or a lingering look. For two ordinary lovers, it would never suffice, but for *keshkai*, who shared one soul, love needed no more than this.

* * * *

Sephil observed the glow of bonfires from his bedchamber window. Tonight, Rhodeen celebrated the accession of two kings, only one of whom would stay and rule. By autumn, Sephil meant to return to Bhellin and resume his quiet life, and had already written to Ampheres informing him of the fact.

Zhanil had his problems, as every king did, but seemed to be faring well. While he had his detractors, his efforts to compromise won praise from both Rhodeen and Turya factions. Thano had helped him select competent advisors, and Kalmeki and Amset, who with his family had followed his charge to his new home, supervised the royal home guard.

There remained little for Sephil to do. He made trips to the temple of Abh to make arrangements for his continuing patronage, and spent time with Nurad, who quietly mourned the absence of his parents and sisters.

"One of your sisters will arrive in a few weeks," said Sephil.

"Saraji is only my half-sister," answered Nurad. "I meant my little sisters. I used to play games with them and read stories to them whenever the eunuchs were too busy for them."

The Tajhaani ambassador, lately arrived at court, reported that Saraji was complying, obeying the tutors Mahtal sent to the harem to teach her the language and customs of Rhodeen. She had chosen a new name, and was learning to accept that as queen she would not be able to wear the veil in her husband's court. Terreh, still mourning Ninarsha's death, disliked the match, but Mahtal would not tolerate her interference and sent Saraji to live with his own wife and daughters until the time came for her to leave Tajhaan.

"The princess has been told her husband is young and handsome," said the ambassador, "and that he is a king. She is most eager to see him."

Perhaps that was even true. Once the girl arrived, Thano would supervise her, and Sephil had permitted Dashir to write her a letter before the latter left for the remote Kirisk sanctuary.

Zhanil wanted his father to stay on in Shemin-at-Khul, but did not press the matter when Sephil made his preferences known.

Home meant more than simply the place where a man was born. Home meant warmth and happiness, a sense of belonging that Rhodeen had never provided. A crown did not change that.

Sephil eagerly anticipated returning to the sanctuary of Abh and sharing his ministry with Nurad. His daughter needed him, as did Lahis. Adeja had not asked him to do so, but Sephil could not imagine leaving his widow, whose family neither understood nor supported her in her grief, without comfort. She would find a welcome home in the sanctuary, among priests and supplicants who needed her gentle presence. Perhaps Nurad would even accept her in place of the mother he had been forced to leave behind.

That night, as the city celebrated, Sephil nearly returned to his old apartments, unoccupied now that Dashir had gone. In the end, he elected not to go, even as he had chosen not to visit the tomb in Tal Charne. He wanted his brother and Adeja to occupy bright places in his memory, and knew he would not find their spirits in those places.

"I wish you were here," he murmured, leaning his head against the cold, leaded glass.

Am I speaking to you, Adeja, or to you, Zhanil? Sephil made no effort to decide, as he wished for both: the brother to beam with glowing approval, the lover to stand beside him and offer his strength, though Sephil knew that he had long ago stopped requiring such support.

I would not be here today without you. I wish you were here to see it, to share the day with me. This time, he knew whom he addressed, and his heart ached.

To be concluded in

West of the Moon

Coming soon.

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About the Author

L.E. Bryce was born in Los Angeles, California and has never lived anywhere else. She has a Masters in English Literature from California State University, Northridge, and currently works as an English teacher. Her Jewish mother, two dogs and passel of cats help her keep her sanity. She is a regular contributor to *Forbidden Fruit* Magazine, and is the author of *Dead to the World, My Sun and Stars, Ki'iri, Snake Bite and Other Dark Homoerotic Fantasies* and *Those Pearls That Were His Eyes*. She maintains a blog at granamyr.livejournal.com.

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